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Front cover painting by Malcolm Smith, illustrating "Revolt of the Devil Star"

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the Editorial

WE'VE got something of a surprise for you this month. And we know it will be a pleasant one. As most of you may have heard by this time, the Ziff-Davis science-fantasy magazines, **FANTASTIC ADVENTURES** and **AMAZING STORIES**, have moved their editorial offices from Chicago to New York. Howard Browne and Lila Shaffer of those magazines welcomed the change, but Bill Hamling, the Managing Editor of **FA** for five years, found it impossible to go along. Bill's home has always been Chicago, and he had no desire to change it.

ALL of which leads up to the fact that we were quick to ask Bill if he would like to join us and handle **IMAGINATION**. Frankly, we were being a bit selfish at the same time because we've known Bill and worked with him off and on for twelve years. So when we put it to him he grinned and said there was nothing he'd rather do than handle **IMAGINATION**. So while we hated to see the Ziff-Davis science-fantasy magazines leave town, we thank them for the fortuitous circumstances that allowed us to turn over **IMAGINATION** to one of the top editors in the field.

SO we're going to introduce you right now to an old friend of yours. And from now on he'll be guiding the destiny of **IMAGINATION**. Take over this editorial, Bill! . . . Rap.

* * *

THIS is probably the first time in science-fantasy history that an editor has written two editorials the same month. On the newsstands right now is the February issue of **FANTASTIC ADVENTURES**, the magazine I managed for Ziff-Davis for five years. That issue contains my last editorial for **FA**. And at the same time Ray Palmer introduces me to the readers of **IMAGINATION**.

TO Ray Palmer all I can say is that whatever I know about this business he taught me. I started out as a fan some twelve years ago, branched out into professional writing, and joined him as an editor at Ziff-Davis. I was sorry to see him leave the company a little over a year ago, but knew that he would make a terrific success of the magazines he had long planned to produce himself. The fact that I am now handling one of those magazines was an unexpected but pleasant coincidence. Ziff-Davis decided

to move to New York, as Ray said earlier, and because of my home and family ties here I could not go along. Perhaps it was meant to be that way. I think so. At any rate, one thing I do know, I'm glad to be at the helm of "Madge." Fact of the matter is, though Forrie Ackerman did have a fanzine of the same title years ago, it was I who suggested the title IMAGINATION to Ray Palmer. Ray used to kid me that he stole it from me. Well, all kidding aside, I'm glad to have it back!

IF you don't mind, I'd like to say one or two things about the magazine I've just left. In my closing editorial for FA I was necessarily brief with my farewell, and because of custom there, was unable to say anything publicly about my personal feelings. But that's not the case here. I can tell you just what I would have liked to have said in FA.

THERE are a lot of magazines on the stands today in the science-fantasy field. They are put out by a great many different companies. I know most of the men who put these magazines out, either personally, or by correspondence. They are all wonderful people. But the family I just left is in a class by itself. Because that's just what it is. The Ziff-Davis Group is the finest firm I've ever come in contact with. From the President of the Company down to the office boys there was a feelings of friendliness that made business a pleasure. As an editor there I was in complete charge of my magazine. B. G. Davis always acted on the idea that he was employing men who knew their business and would not let him down. When a feeling of confidence like that exists between

the executive and editorial department you're bound to have a good magazine along with a most cordial relationship.

SO what I couldn't do in FA I'd like to do here. Say thank you to a swell boss, B. G. Davis . . . And at the same time I'd like to wish the best of luck to two very fine friends and associates, Howard Browne, and Lila Shaffer. I know that AMAZING STORIES and FANTASTIC ADVENTURES will continue to be two of the finest magazines in the country under their capable editorship.

BUT of course, there's going to be another fine magazine to contend with! Or should I say, there already is! Ray Palmer has done a swell job of launching "Madge," and from what I've seen of the fan mail, you readers like it too! And don't worry about drastic changes in the policy of the magazine. There won't be any to speak of. You're going to get the same high quality in future stories that you've come to recognize already.

HOWEVER, one thing I would like to say here about stories. IMAGINATION, being the universal-type title that it is, is not restricted to any one phase of science fiction or fantasy. You'll find a well rounded lineup in every issue, of the best in science fiction, fantasy, and even an occasional weird piece. Along the latter lines watch for a shocker by the new find, Richard Matheson. It's a grim little tale that will make you shiver. We're scheduling it for the next issue.

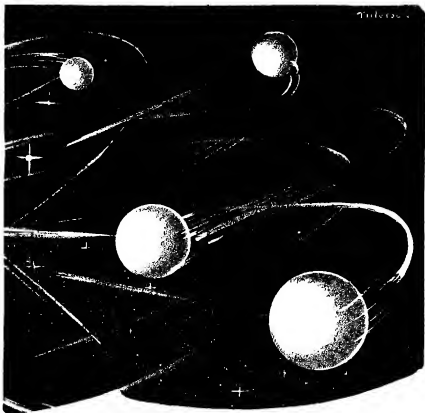
OUR own personal discovery, Charles F. Myers, is in this
(Concluded on page 31)



REVOLT OF THE DEVIL STAR

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

The Law of the Universe stated that all life must create and die. Devil Star defied the law—for did he not know the dread secret of his birth?



Illustrated by Joe W. Tillotson

THE story of Darkness has been told. Darkness, the dreamer who crossed the immeasurable gulf of lightless emptiness between two universes. He, an energy creature tens of millions of miles in girth, sought the answer to life. Perhaps he found that answer in death, when he mated in the

thus-far inaccessible forty-eighth band of life.

And the story of Darkness' daughter Sun Destroyer has been told. She plunged back along Darkness' trail to seek out that aged, sorrowing being whose name was Oldster. For Oldster was wise. He had counselled Darkness. Surely

Oldster could lead Sun Destroyer to her life's completion in the forty-ninth band of hyper-space. But there was no forty-ninth band, unless it lay in Sun Destroyer's wild fantasies of impossible happiness. She too died, yearning for her son Vanguard, the infant purple light who lay helpless in the seventeenth band of hyper-space.

The story of Vanguard too has been told. He was renamed Yellow Light by his taunting playmates, because of imperfections in his central core. Physically disabled by his long stay in the seventeenth band, he was never to know happiness. Oldster, in his compassion and wisdom, led Vanguard to mate—to create and thus to die—for he knew Vanguard's true greatness, that he was destined to father a new race who would supplant the old.

And this is the last story of the Darkness, the story of the purple light named Devil Star.

YOUTH and play. Youth and that great yard of galaxies with the great high fence of the darkness. Youth and the joys of living . . . and the deep-fluttering memory of his birth.

Into his ten-millionth year he never spoke of that memory. He kept it cold and suffocating in an unplumbed chamber of his thought swirls. Then it pressed upward in its wild escape.

"Moon Flame!"

His companion in the joyous race across that galaxy touched him briefly with his visions.

"You spoke?"

"Yes! Moon Flame, listen to me. I must know something. Whether you—if the others—if *they* remember. Remember the moment of birth! Remember the mother—the dying father—the band of life—"

His aura quivered. He strove not to read concern in the gaze of Moon Flame.

"I do not remember it," said Moon Flame slowly. "Birth? Death? Father? You speak in riddles, Devil Star. Come now, faster! I see the others in the galaxy beyond. Forget that silliness!"

For a clairvoyant second in his time-scale, the raging thoughts of Devil Star swelled. And subsided.

He flung himself into Moon Flame's path.

"You must listen," he said tensely. "We must all beware. For all of us will die!"

Moon Flame did not lessen his speed. "Die?"

"You do not understand, Moon Flame. Death is our destiny. It was destined long before we were born."

Moon Flame stared. "Then if this strange thing is destined, no one can win against it."

"No one?" Devil Star swerved in his backward flight, brushing the violet furnace of a super-sun. He said, "I shall win, Moon Flame. I shall fight death—the death green

lights will attempt to give us. I shall interrupt destiny. I shall be its master!"

But Moon Flame did not understand. He brushed Devil Star aside with an impatient tractor ray. With a scornful glance backward, he went shooting off leaving Devil Star caught in a wake of incandescent sparks.

Devil Star stared after him, but all he saw was the immortal blaze of his life's years.

He was the rebel. He would not die!

DEVIL Star had five million more years of peace, of caniptious play. And then . . .

He was alone, and cradling his loneliness, atop a galaxy shaped like a masterfully blown, brimming wine-glass, with the bubbles of stars clouding about its rim. The moment of his curse had come, for a vast cunning had grown in him. He would lie here, shielded by a giant star, and he would wait.

The waiting was not long. Came the beat of a life-force. He felt himself tremble. Deep inside something was whispering that he should forget, turn back—play—skim along the surface of life as did Moon Flame and the other energy children. Accept destiny!

Destiny! The cunning shift and quiver of sub-atomic particles that began when the universe began.

He would not.

The life force pressed in, strengthened. And with a thread of vision he saw a matured green light, her central core burning with an hypnotic, frightening radiance.

Devil Star surged up closer to the star that shielded him, for now he sensed the swirl and pulse of another life. With a thinned ray of sight, he beheld the purple light ripping through space toward the deadly source of the vibration that drew him.

For one chaotic moment, Devil Star's purpose was as nothing. He knew this energy creature.

"Solar Cloud!"

His cry of warning blasted through space. He expanded to normal, came into full view of green and purple light. But neither heard his cry. They could not—would not—see or hear him. They were caught on that barbed law from which the mere interference of a Devil Star could not set them free. They hung motionless in space, the huge green light languidly rotating, the slightly smaller purple light, Solar Cloud, staring at her in hard, bright wonder. And Devil Star knew that they were speaking along such tight bands of energy he could not hear what they said.

"Solar Cloud," he whispered, "stop!"

And then reaction. The full knowledge of his ultimate triumph came to him. Solar Cloud would die. But Devil Star would live—would grow

old beyond death.

At once he was transformed back into a creature of cunning.

The green light disappeared into a hyper-space. The purple light appeared bewildered. Then he too disappeared, and Devil Star, bitterly frightened that already he had lost them, felt the click in his thought swirls which transported him into the second band of the universe's forty-eight faces. Here was cosmos in wild, disordered motion. Spasms of pain ripped through Devil Star as eating vibrations impinged on him. For a flickering moment he allowed himself to wonder at the reason behind that amok universe. Causeless?

Nothing without cause!

Or was there?

He flicked into the next band, following green and purple light upward until around them were those cubed celestial bodies of the forty-seventh band.

The green light vanished.

Solar Cloud remained behind, bewilderedly searching for her. A wild excitement shook Devil Star. He must get closer. Solar Cloud knew nothing of a forty-eighth band, but surely the green light would somehow draw him into it. And Devil Star would inadvertently be drawn with him!

And, subtly, he knew why he must follow. There was the memory—the damning memory of his birth—and he must know if it was mem-

ory, or a phantasm without meaning in fact.

He moved closer to Solar Cloud . . . and, abruptly, felt himself swept along in some giant tide. He had his moment of surprise before his consciousness momentarily blurred.

Then, sharply, he was aware.

His visions darted out, contracted. The full knowledge of where he was smote him. Crystalline tongues of fire quivered from his contracting body. He knew he had done an impossible thing.

He, unmatured, was in the forty-eighth band.

TIME passed, the great, vital pulses of time, flowing like an unseen river through that band where life was born. Devil Star watched numbly, without horror, triumph, feeling.

He saw that mating of green and purple light as their central cores met in annihilating fusion.

He saw the grayness of coming death settle over Solar Cloud.

He drifted into a torpor, saw the pulsing white ball which heralded life, and saw nothing there. The moment was relived. The memory had been there.

Then, all that was gone. Against his will, he had been moved to the first band in true space.

His thoughts did not function. He hung in a box of emptiness between two stars, unable to plumb

the depths of that staggering event.

Solar Cloud was dead, or dying.

As he, Devil Star, was destined to die.

Now the thoughts did start. An incredible thing had happened. Where had it begun? Ten thousand billion years ago? Or—a mere fragment of time away to that moment when Devil Star was born?

His thoughts took their upward surge. As full awareness came back, he felt a shock of knowledge.

He was being watched, and it was the green light, she who had conceived a life and heartlessly destroyed one, who was watching. A sudden cunning hate took hold of him. He held her stare, flung it back arrogantly. And she watched him with coldness from the eminence of her greater size.

She said chillingly, "I saw you there. And it was not meant to be. Will you forget?"

"Forget?" The cry was shocked from him. "You are begging me to forget, Comet Glow?"

And as he mockingly uttered her name, she drew back, a darkness creeping into the brilliant depths of her. Slowly: "If that is the word you wish to use, yes."

He surged closer to her. "It is the word, Mother of four children! Then let me also forget the arts of existence—the eating of energy, the dispelling of it—the use of my para-propellents. I would as soon forget them. And let me also for-

get the dread moment of my birth!"

And he knew what effect that had on her, for he had told none but Moon Flame. Involuntarily she expanded, looked at him with dawning horror.

"Remember—that?" The words were torn from her.

"I remember it. And I will not forget," and he was gone from her sight into another band of hyperspace. But she followed, reaching out with tight bands of energy, holding him fast, and yet at a distance.

"Devil Star!" The words came faintly. "What is it you search for?"

She was debasing herself, she, a green light, millions of years older than he. And he knew his moment of gloating should be put aside. He was young. There was much knowledge to be had.

"I am searching for—" He stopped. For what? A restless quiver of sparks leapt from him. "Comet Glow, perhaps I am seeking to be master of my own fate."

FOR long and long her somber gaze rested on him. "Devil Star, it is not possible."

Instantly he tore from her restraining bands of energy. "You say that," he cried, "who saw me, an unmatured purple light, in the band of life! Who knows that I have a memory which carries me to the moment of my own birth!"

And he stopped, chilled by her

odd, pitying silence, by the dread answer she seemed to be giving him. Another thought rose clamoring. Green lights are—different. They have a cruel, natural wisdom purple lights cannot hope to possess.

And, mockingly, that ruinous other-thought: *They?*

He was sinking into his dreadful abyss.

"Devil Star." The sorrowing thoughts of Comet Glow came. "You are young. Live as life *must* live."

She pressed closer, laving him with her anxiety. "Do you seek to change the natal matrix of the vast universe? Ten thousand billion years ago—and perhaps even longer, Devil Star! The pattern of all that is was foreordained—and all that will be! No electron that moved along its path but what moved in response to a prior event.

"There has been no thought—and shall be none—that was not caused by a prior thought.

"No result without cause. And no event without result!"

His words came out of the tortured depths of him. "I was in the band of life. And it was against the pattern. There was no reason for it—no reason!"

"Yes," she whispered sadly. "There was a reason. And if you persist in searching for that reason, you will surely have further proof of the shackles destiny binds us with."

Alone in the quivering brightness

hung Devil Star. Not make use of knowledge? No result without cause? The thoughts tugged and tore. Into his mind came the drug-ging answer to all problems. He slept. And in his sleep, an insidious process began working, a selection and burying of the hated answers.

And when he awoke he knew, coldly secret within him, that he was exterior to the pattern—the rebel, the one who would revolt against destiny.

SOMEWHERE in the passing millions of years, the senseless, joyous years of youth, his Mother vanished forever. He took small note of it. Comet Glow, too, faded into a forgotten darkness. Other names passed from the scene. And in from the wings, for reasons none questioned, came other, younger energy creatures . . .

. . . He played. And there was a green light, one of the twin siblings of Comet Glow, who played along with him.

Her name was Dark Fire, and sometimes, looking down into the black whirling cauldron of a sunspot, he could see the same primeval excitement with movement that marked her.

He felt a wonderful sense of companionship with that green light, a tenderness, perhaps because he too had her taste for the unexpected. The pattern of play in this surging universe concerned the helter-skel-

ter rearrangement of galaxies themselves. But Dark Fire often explored more novel avenues of play. Out of a nebula's heart she would come racing, trailing hot streams of excess energy—would circle him—dance—afire with some tremendous importance.

But that friendship was to end.

"Come, Devil Star, look what I've done!"

He saw the planet she had made, and marvelled. A planet whose surface crawled with beings made of solid matter. An incredible kind of actual life whose base was silicon—or carbon; he did not try to find out.

"It dies so swiftly," he said.

"But its time-scale is different. I shall tend this planet," she dreamed. "The life-forms will improve on themselves. Maybe someday they will come on out into space." Excitement was in her. "And they will never know that she who created them watches their brave venture."

For long and long Devil Star brooded over that planet. In the sub-swirls of his mind a remembrance shook him.

"Something troubles you, Devil Star?"

"Yes," he said faintly. "The creation of that planet. It is . . . against the pattern!"

She sensed the problem, but there was only cunning mockery in her gaze. "Against it? Devil Star, there

is nothing against the pattern—and no one who can fight it."

"No!" he cried in denial. "Dark Fire, you had your choice—to create or not to create. You selected—you were master of yourself in that selection."

"No. I did that which I *would* do. I had no choice." She rotated along an axis, probing him, mocking him. "We shall explore this thought of yours. I have choice, so you would say, of destroying this life I have created, or of allowing it to exist. But I have no choice."

"You have choice!"

"No."

Again that mockery. And suddenly she drew back, lashing out with a destroying heat-ray that in a cosmic instant turned her planet into a molten, endless sea. Devil Star looked at it in horror, and a clamoring thought rose in him: *As she would destroy me!*

That shocked moment held. Then, mockingly,

"I made no choice, Devil Star. I could not have acted but as I did. For am I not the product of my Mother? Of all who went before her? Of all the events that have impinged on me to make me as I am? Am I not moved and swayed by cosmic tides that began long before I began? And you, Devil Star, are but a wave-curl in the tide . . . an event in space-time, forcing me to make my so-called 'choice.' Choice? There was none.

"There was an inevitable act."

He stared at her askance. Then a thought shook him to the innermost part of his being.

"Dark Fire," he whispered, "until now we have been friends. We can no longer be friends. For soon a time will come when I must—when I *shall*—make a choice between two events. Do you understand?"

Puzzlement was in her gaze. "I do not understand," she said slowly. "We must always be friends."

A fuzzy-headed comet slashed its path across the dark heavens between them.

Devil Star said, in mirthless mockery, "Friends! Can green and purple lights ever be friends?"

For long and long she held that thought. Then, as if in involuntary reaction against the horror that rose from the instinctive matrix of her, she surged back across the heavens. From that distance, her amplifying fear and shock drove against him.

"You speak, and do not know whereof you speak!"

He followed in triumph, but Dark Fire dwindled more swiftly, as if knowing that to flee from him would dull her turmoil. But drifting back came her voice, cold and faint.

"Devil Star, there will be no choice!"

THE friendship of Dark Fire and Devil Star was truly done. For even when they were members of

the same playing group, there was this cold thought: I am destined to die, and to die in a certain manner. I shall therefore turn destiny aside. I shall not die!

When Dark Fire came for him, he would be ready for her.

When the time came, ironically, he was not ready . . .

He was in his forty-millionth year, still a youth in his vast time-scale, when he began drifting away from his other friends as well. For already he felt the hunger in him, the first deep pangs, and mistook it for his need to acquire knowledge.

His search for knowledge took him not into the macro, but into the microcosms. Surely the larger universe was near the end result while the smaller was near the beginning. Somewhere in that complexity of sub-particles he would find a result without cause!

His tools were crude. It was nothing to pluck a star from the heavens with a reaching tractor ray—to split it—explode it. But to shear a molecule from a parent mass, to hold it inviolate from its fellows, seemed impossible. He raged at the task for a million years, forgetting all the names linked to his life—forgetting the menace of Dark Fire.

And he succeeded.

His success lasted for one thrilling moment. In a vacuum of its own, untouched by outside force, that

microcosm hung pendant. Devil Star saw it fuzzily, by the reflecting thread of electrons that he sent against it. And was to see it no more. For in that moment of triumph came the icy cold certainty that he was being watched.

That captured micro-universe was gone from his delicate grasp as if it had never been. With a violence beyond imagining, he expanded to half again his diameter. From a dozen portions of his body, his visions leaped out. And he saw Dark Fire.

He was gripped by the splendor of her, as she moved slowly down an aisle of stars toward him . . . her visions already touching his, holding them with hard bright purpose. Against the dark background of space, her central green light was lustrous.

"Devil Star, there will be no choice!"

The sudden clangor of that voice from the past had no meaning to Devil Star, though he frantically tried to examine it. But meanings, reasons, coherent thinking were lost to him. As Dark Fire drifted nearer, he was enclosed in a vast peace. He knew at once that his searching, even his finding, was a patchwork substitute for this great longing that had been built into the very fabric of him.

Now came the voice of Dark Fire, humming, insidious.

"Devil Star, our moment has

come—as we knew it would. Devil Star, follow me!"

AND now he hung in the vibrant band of life, drawn there half by her will, half by his. And he trembled with the half-memory of death, and yet bathed by the hypnotic vibrations flooding from the central light of her, so that he knew peace and understood the answers to all questions.

She was dwindling. He knew what he must do.

As she would destroy me!

The thought raged, but he prepared.

Then hiatus . . . the gulf of timelessness between two instants of time. There was a click deep in the subterranean caverns of his thought-swirls. It was as if he had been transported to another band of hyper-space.

But was this another hyper-space? It could not be. In that depthless ladder of universes, and he had traversed them all, there was nothing similar.

He viewed this strange space with childish wonder, knowing that he was here, yet without a body, without a purple central light.

And he knew, too, that actually he was in the forty-eighth band of hyper-space, about to die, and at peace.

He was there—and here. Fantasy or reality? It did not matter. It came to him, in wonder as gentle as

light scattering, that here there was a mystery he might never comprehend.

A queer, geometric, somehow logical universe. Yes, the idea of logic pressed insistently in on him. And yet, what happened did not seem logical. For all of these clean-cut star-systems, though vast distances stretched between them, seemed equally large to his sight. There was a feeling of distance — without perspective.

Between those star-systems were no dust-motes, no hurrying comets, no uncollected suns, no irregularity. There was dark, logical vacuum.

But suns, sometimes whole groups of suns, whirled sparkling across that vacuum from one spinning galaxy to another. That galaxy, in turn, urged another unit from its turning heart, or majestically rounded rim. The quiet, orderly exchange was magnificent to watch. The exchanged suns, or solar systems, quietly fell into new orbits that seemed prepared for them.

He moved quietly through this charmed universe, wondering about it. How quiet, how at peace, how *right*. And then, as he hung motionless again in dark vacuum, pondering, he saw a single glowing sun detach itself from the rounding rim of the nearby galaxy. It sped toward him, closer. And yet he would not move. The distance lessened. It was upon him, passing through him.

For a burning moment, he was locked in its fiery heart, and all of being blazed with hurt.

Surging, he fought his way out, sped away, looked back, bewildered. The speeding sun faltered in flight, was motionless. The entire universe seemed to quiver at that discord. Then the sun reversed direction, reluctantly falling back into its parent star system.

And the system exploded!

Frozen with horror, Devil Star—the bodiless entity of him—saw that sudden, senseless explosion, watched a hundred suns shot like vast bullets in a hundred flaming paths. Those suns plowed through nearby galaxies, drove relentlessly to new positions in other galactic accretions. The universe bubbled and seethed with irregularity. There were more explosions, more frantic exchanges. The universe was alight with flaming cores of brilliance. There was an urgent hustle and bustle.

Then the exchanged suns began to find their places without commotion. The explosions grew less in number. The heavens ceased their horrifying agitation. Order was restored. The orderly suns, sometimes with attendant planets, marched quietly across the dark sky.

Numbed, Devil Star did not dare to move. Then a clamoring need rose in him. There was something he must do. From the strange, dimensionless distances he saw a sun

moving toward him. He rushed to meet it. Again that prolonged, fiery moment of agony.

And that universe, that industrious universe with its lawless logic—that universe was gone.

Devil Star was back in the forty-eighth band, watching Dark Fire.

THE moment of watching drew out.

"Devil Star!" The cry blasted across space, imperative; but in the sub-strata of that cry was unspeakable horror.

And faintly Devil Star spoke: "No."

She came across the spaces, trailing chaotic streams of energy. Her speechless rage preceded her like a curling tidal wave. Astounded, he felt a searing burst of pain in the energy fields of his complex body, and saw that a flaming red beam of force had leaped from her. He tried to beat it off with instantly erected screens. The beam seared through. She was pouring the energy of her body into that beam, intent on eating through to the heart of him.

"You must die, Devil Star!" The mindless cacophony screamed at him. "You must die! You are in the band of life! And you must die!"

He spurred frantically back, but she followed. Desperately he felt that click in his mind which told him he was out of the forty-eighth

band and into the forty-seventh. But she burst into that space after him—and the next and the next.

As he fled, a chilling certainty rose in Devil Star. The laws of life had been violated. No matter that he had triumphed in some obscure, staggering way that he could not yet comprehend. To Dark Fire, it made no difference. Her wisdom, her destroying hate, as with all green lights, must have its source in blind instinct. There had been outrage. He must die.

A cruel incisiveness claimed him as he dropped down the terraced spaces of the universe. Here and there, he plucked small suns from the heavens, converted them to seething energy. When she burst through after him into the second band of space, he was ready for her. All the quivering excess energy his swollen body held was channeled into a concentrated sword of destruction that smote her point-blank.

Shaken even beyond horror, he saw those clouds of fuming light that exploded from the core of her.

She hung without motion, lax, visions down, a sickly pale radiance creeping in waves through her. Across her central green light fitful waves of yellow surged. And then the force fields of her body lost their hold. Visibly she began to expand.

"I am dying!"

The hideous accusation blasted

out at him.

"As you would have had me die!"

"No, no! Devil Star, you have done a terrible thing. You—do not yet know—how terrible. Terrible—for you."

"I had choice!" he cried bitterly.

Silence. Then, from a distance, muttering: "Choice. No. There could have been no—choice. It began—how long ago? Before you were born, Devil Star. Back to—the beginning. No thought but caused a thought. No motion but caused a motion. How—else could it be?"

"Devil Star!" That muttering, distant voice held blind despair. "Your only immortality — truly, your only happiness—lay in that child you and I—would have created . . ."

Her voice stopped. In hideous fascination, Devil Star watched that expansive greyness sweeping across her. Then, convulsively, he thrust out his para-ptopellents, sped across the galaxies, not stopping, frantically seeking forgetfulness.

For a million years Devil Star continued that senseless pace. Finally, deep into the bottomless darkness that cupped the lenticular universe, he stopped. And there was ultimate horror in him. The memory was not sheared off. He could not outrun himself. He was cursed.

CURSED—but alive. The thought did not have wings to make him soar. For Dark Fire, the friend

of his youth, was dead. No matter that all of nature had conspired against him, a purple light; no matter that Dark Fire, from some blind instinct, had sought with all her being to fulfill a supposedly incorruptible law of the universe. She was dead, and he had killed her.

He hung quivering and lost in that lightless emptiness. His triumph, for the moment, was tasteless. For was it triumph? Had that succession of events which resulted in Dark Fire's death been inevitable—part of the pattern after all?

Then he had not escaped!

He shrank into himself so that even the mother universe and its searching brilliance seemed not to exist. Now he was as alone as mortality could be, feeding on his inner resources, a circuitous being independent of the flux and strain of conflicting energies. He was master of himself for this naked, two dimensional instant of time!

. . . No. There was the past, whipping his every thought and action into submission with infinitely reaching arms of cause and result. He had not escaped . . .

In that moment of realization, a new fury entered the life of Devil Star. It came like the roar of a monster full-born in the sub-swirls of his mind . . . a monster clawing, rearing, fighting for emergence into the searching light of his conscious mind—and unable to emerge!

He was shaken to the depths by

that beast—that depthless, unuttered longing which he could not give a name. Entombed in his self-imposed darkness, away from the entropic surge and sway of the universe, he felt that longing engulf him.

"It is something I want," he gasped. "Something I must have. Must!"

. . . Then, slipping unbidden from another corner of his mind, came the feeling of solution. And that new thought held him rigid. He did not dare to believe that the monster was out of his prison. And yet, what else could it be? Hope surged through him.

"I was in another universe," his thoughts rioted. "In that moment before *she* would have had me fling out my central purple core and die, I was transported to another band of space, a band I never saw before. And when I returned to the band of life, my will to die was gone."

He hung laxly, surfeited with emotion. It was that he longed for. And if it were not—he thrust the clangorous thought away.

Like a cocoon unfolding, he pushed aside the darkness enclosing him. And as he beheld the resplendent lens of the vast universe, the prime conviction of his life returned. Surely that universe and its myriad avenues was not mirrored into being by the counterplay of energies at the beginning of time. Destiny could be turned aside. Had

he not so turned it? And the answer to its turning lay in that hidden band of space.

He would find that band, would put his life into it. And would find the answer to all of being!

DEVIL Star drifted back into the universe again, captivated with the wonder of his upward spiraling thoughts. For, it seemed, the mind was a turbulent structure, as frantic in its upheavals and overthrows as the interior fury of a white dwarf star. Somewhere in his thought swirls, caged for this moment, were the sharpest agonies of his life. In their place had risen hope, and it was a thrilling hope indeed. The hidden band!

He would find that hidden band, though he had to roam the vast universe a hundred times over. And would still this thunderous longing.

He stepped up his velocity, thrusting out his visions in growing rapture as he hurled through the light-spattered outermost fringes of the dazzling universe. Here was splendor, conflict, movement! And he was part of it again. Then, the worse for its suddenness, a chill spread through him. He felt the unmistakable pulse of a nearby life-force.

His one thought was to flee—to disappear again to some quiet corner of the cosmos—but no, for some reason he must stay . . .

"Devil Star, where have you

been?"

Unerringly, without will to stop himself, he faced about in his flight, with deadly accuracy placing his visions on the green light who had uttered that question. She rode the bright heavens less than ten millions of miles away, and he was caught here, knowing her name and knowing her innermost purpose in life.

She repeated the question, naively unaware of its importance, staring at him with a bland curiosity. He gazed back blankly, wondering at that tremendous secret which she instinctively hid from purple lights.

He whispered, "World Rim, you do not *know* where I have been?"

She laughed. "Should I know?"

"No! No! You couldn't know. And you couldn't believe. I have been—"

And he stopped, faint with his knowledge of what she was and what she must be thinking deep in her mind. He must be cunning, strong, treacherous, too! He quivered with effort, laughed in the strange way that was possible for him.

"I have been," he chided, "ten billion light years away. I discovered fourteen million new comets and tied their beards together!"

She was piqued. "You must have been to a very interesting place," she decided. Tentatively: "Shall we go there together, Devil Star? I am tired of playing with those silly energy children. They're stupid."

Said Devil Star, magnanimously, "We shall go together! Now, or later?"

"Now!"

Devil Star frowned. "We'd better not," he said cautiously. "Not right away. Better make sure none of the others are around to see us. Come, World Rim!" And he shot into instant motion, gaining two light years on her before she knew what was happening. She surged into frantic motion after him, bewildered, panicky with incomprehension of his actions or thoughts.

Coldly, cruelly, he let himself be occluded from her in the heaving patchwork of a dark nebular cloud. World Rim was left behind, reproachful. He would see her again.

He had no room for emotion now, only purpose. He thundered through the empty spaces, veered away from galaxies that vibrated with the noxious beat of the life force, and found a galaxy where peace was.

He hung there, thinking. He had cheated death! Truly, that had been the prime search of his life. And, having cheated it, he would discover the way to knowledge unending. He would discover the hidden band.

Something had happened in that band which enabled him to triumph over life's first law. What?

Had it given him choice? He was convinced that it had.

IN the millions of years that now elapsed. Devil Star came to think

of that band as the band of decision. He had been in that band. He had interrupted its faultless rightness. He had interrupted destiny! And it was somewhere!

The bands of space, in all their complexity, knew him. He went up them one by one, studying them with a coldly disciplined leisure. With the cold analytical tool of his mind, he probed for the reasons behind those strange layers of hyper-space. He gazed on the obscene ugliness of the third band, wondering what lay behind the dark skin of nothingness that clove it. But the answer did not lie there. For he could not enter.

The fourth band, where he was mirrored endlessly to the vanishing point.

The fifth band, where all of space was geared to such a time-scale that the blazing components of the universe were serpentes of solid matter.

The sixth, seventh, eighth. The ninth, inhabited by the brittle cinders of suns, gaunt reminders of the universe's ultimate decadence. Those suns, however, were not burned-out matter, they were matter held in some timeless moment of atomic convulsion, as if the fury of heat and light had been sheared away. What reason? Was there here a result without cause?

But he knew there *was* reason. The universe was warped, curled, fighting its own irresistible stress

and strain, stretching itself out of shape, discarding its own topological impossibilities into hidden pockets of space. A straight line was no less straight if warped by a gravitational field. For who or what, in that field, could determine any other straightness.

He ascended the bands, moving with a leisure he did not think was unnatural. His purpose held white and pure. He had no thought for others of his kind. Unendingly, the secrets of space channeled into his mind. He was bursting with the wonder of it.

You are young, Devil Star!

"I am young," came the unbidden thought, "and still able—" *No!*

He rearranged that astounding thought. He was young, deathless. He was annointed with a great destiny. Destiny? No, Devil Star, you shall arrange your destiny.

. . . *Youth.*

The fifteenth, the twentieth, the thirtieth bands. He searched them all, unhurrying, dawdling, experiencing no sense of failure. He was content.

You are young, Devil Star! You are still young!

The sub-thought was screaming at him.

He did not hurry.

HE came to the thirty-fifth band, where unattached colors of violent hue did their spasmodic dances through matterless space.

. . . *Youth. There is still time, not for this, but for that other!*

The forty-first. The forty-sixth. He made his leisurely transit into the forty-seventh. And then there was chaos. A jumble, a mumble of burning thoughts that turned him into something he had no mind to recognize. He was chaos.

Recognition again. Wave upon wave of horror rolled over him. Condensing energy rained from his outer to his inner body. For he knew what he had tried to do — tried, again and again, and, time after time, had failed to do: to enter the forty-eighth band.

In his chaos, he had hurled himself at that unseen wall, and time after time, it had hurled him back. He could not enter.

Thought came slowly. He was numbed with the attack of the monster inside him. Fleeting, knowledge came. But it was gone before he could snatch it. Then he blundered like a blinded creature down the bands.

He knew what he must do, what he could not deny.

He left that galaxy, plunged across the winding arteries where dark flowed, was in the galaxy of his birth. And at last, alone in space, he faced her.

"It is you," she said wonderingly. "Devil Star."

His returning thoughts were heavy. "Yes, World Rim. And I have come to keep my promise. To

go with you to the place I found."

She was searching him, whirling nearer, intent with her visions. And he saw with shock that she was changed in some way he could not put into words.

"We will go now," he said.

Still she searched him. Uneasily she rotated against her starred background.

She brooded. Then, with chilling reluctance, she said, "Very well, we shall go to this place. Where is it?"

World Rim was older than when he last saw her; he knew, coldly, that she had had children. And yet she seemed still naive. He was impatient.

"I shall follow *you*," he said.

A subtle change came over her. She stared. And her thought came. "Very well. Devil Star! Follow me!"

In growing delight, he followed her up the bands, as obedient to his ruinous emotions as any unsuspecting purple light who had followed that path before him. Finally he burst through into the tenth band. World Rim was there, inert in space, watching a tiny, faceted star. Suddenly he was chilled by the immensity of her abstraction.

"Green light!" he whispered.

At first she seemed not to hear him. Then she touched him briefly with a vision ray.

"Devil Star," she murmured. "No. It's no use. There is something wrong. Go away."

The utter calamitousness of that order held him rigid.

"There is nothing wrong," he whispered. "I am here. I shall go with you."

Her visions wavered away. "No, there is something wrong," she repeated stubbornly. "Why should I take you anywhere?" Then, craftily, "Where is there to take you?"

HE burst into the full flood of her visions. He was trembling, trying to reject what he heard, and not succeeding. Welling up from the depths of him came knowledge of the ultimate horror he was facing. Here—now—he must defeat the horror, or he was lost to it and would live with it forever.

"I shall go with you," he said in bitter frenzy. "You shall take me with you — to the forty-eighth band!"

And as soon as the words were out, he knew he should not have spoken them. Her faint thoughts came:

"It is," she said wonderingly, "the place you had been when I last saw you so many years ago. But no. It is impossible, Devil Star! Perhaps you are deceiving me again."

He surged closer, reckless, uncaring. "Deceived you! It is you who deceived me, deceived me and all purple lights. But I was not fooled green light!"

And it flooded out of him, half in pride, half in scorn, the whole

story of his anarchistic fight against destiny.

"I fought you, World Rim," he lashed out, "and I fought all other green lights—and the universe itself!" Stay it though he would, a yawning cavern was engulfing him. He trembled, striving to bring himself up out of that utter chaos of dark. But he spoke on, raging, alternately frightened and astounded at what he was speaking.

And from World Rim came silence.

"Speak!" he said wildly. "There is a need in me, a longing. I do not know what it is!"

She seemed to shrink, until she was small, her central light wavering.

"Then I know," she whispered. "Devil Star, you wish to die."

"No!"

"And you wish to create. To create and die."

He stared, his thought swirls shaken with those words.

"To create," he whispered.

Now her voice lifted, firm with conviction. "I see it all now, Devil Star. You wish to die, and in dying to create. All energy creatures, even green lights after their fourth giving-of-birth, must do that, or they will be very unhappy. It is very clear. But also you want to find that impossible band of decision you talk about."

His thoughts were tortured. Yet he knew that from her deeply bur-

ied instincts, the true answer to his longing had come.

"Then I must create," he said hollowly. "And you must take me there—to the forty-eighth band!"

"No." The word shattered against him. "For when we got there, it might be the same as with — Dark Fire."

There was a humming within him, a growing madness. "We must go!" he said violently.

Sparkles of flame shot from the core of her.

"No," she repeated stubbornly. "I do not want to, and there is nothing to do about it. Somehow you must have changed, Devil Star."

She laughed suddenly, peering at him.

"It is very funny! You wish to create, to die. But now you will be unable to do either. Nor can you reach the band of decision, for you believe it lies within the forty-eighth band. Yes, you've changed—changed!"

Paralyzed, he hung in space, the resplendent mindless giants of the universe seeming to fling her words back in brassy echoes.

She began drifting away, her thoughts roaring into his thought swirls, tripled in volume and strident with their connotations. "Only green lights remember the moments of their birth, Devil Star! Else how could they know their way back to the forty-eighth band when the time

came?" Came her dwindling laughter, across the rushing spaces, into the maddened thought swirls of Devil Star.

Horror had been piled on horror. He could endure no more.

THEY would see him from afar, streaming across the star fields, not pausing, hurrying only, hurrying to some place that had no location. And they would see him plunging up the starry axle of some galactic wheel . . . And still again, rigid in abstraction, grasping at space and its dust in a timeless query none of them would ever understand.

He was there when they were born, there when they died. And his name was never known.

Matter changed, dropped slowly toward that bottom level where time must end. Devil Star lived on.

The mother green light paused in the sixth band of hyper-space. For, scarcely a light year away, the giant body of the legendary creature hung sleeping.

Full of tenderness for her newborn child and for all life, she was filled with reverence. Out of what unexplained past had that aged purple light come? As she drifted nearer, he stirred, awoke, saw her.

She scarcely dared to think. But she would not leave. She spoke, whispered.

"We have seen you from afar, often. And you have never spoken.

And you must be lonely."

"Lonely!" The word came in a racking burst. "I am not lonely. I do not wish to be disturbed. Now go."

She was filled with compassion. "I shall go. But I shall come again. And the others will know of you, and revere you, and perhaps those who seek knowledge will come to you. And you shall have a name."

Tenderly, remembering the naming of her youngest, she renamed her oldest. "To us, you shall be known as Oldster."

She left him with his thoughts . . .

* * *

—I thought to master destiny. But destiny masters me. I cannot exclude the universe which continues to give me life.

—There is space, and there are stars, and of the things to know about them I have little to seek out. I have traveled the star-lanes for eons, filled with my longing, and the search for knowledge has only been the disguised search for my life's completion.

—Yet I have learned. But what I have failed to learn is that which keeps my life burning.

—Do we have choice. Did I have choice. For there was the band of decision. Oh, the years have passed, and there is no answer. Space-time began—where?—how? Result without cause! I have searched—searched downward into miniscule universes—striving to find that which came

into being without a first motion. I have trapped matter's smallest part, stripped space of all influences around it. And having trapped it, could not observe it! For observation is influence.

—In that vacuous cage, did that particle move in paths of its own choosing? If it did—without cause—

—But no. The universe decays, and draws life into decadence with it. There is no hope . . .

THERE was Darkness.

And Sun Destroyer.

And Vanguard.

And the millions, the tens of millions of years that passed.

With drudging energy, Oldster heaved his vast body into a ragged motion that took him for the last time across the flowing rivers of the sky, into the first deeps of the black gulf Darkness crossed. There, beyond sight of the universe, he drew his visions in about him.

He would sleep now. He would decay down to that moment when the centripetal urge for life would grow too feeble. The last bounds of his defense would wander off. For now he could not be disturbed.

"Awake, Oldster."

The serene, yet lordly voice echoed through and through that immeasurably deep cavern of thoughtlessness where Oldster resided.

"Awake, and awake to the high moment of your long life."

Awareness came to Oldster, aware-

ness strong and lashing. His vast body heaved and writhed as he beheld the icy horror of his return to life. For from outside this packet of cancelling forces that was himself had come a voice.

"No!" The word shouted within him: yet he knew its violence had reached him who had so cruelly shattered his dream of night. "No! Whoever you are, whatever, leave me! Ah, you have made me live again—as Sun Destroyer—and Vanguard—"

"And it is of Vanguard we would speak." The thought vibrated in serene, lordly compassion against his thought swirls. "Now, you who were known as Devil Star, look upon us!"

Wave upon wave of horror engulfed him as that command drove in. He would not! The rebel thought endured only long enough to be swept away by the shattering failures of his life. He was not master. Not to fight, not to reach—ah, there would have lain happiness!

Thinly at first his visions moved from him—then in thick beams that would bring full revelation of his tormentor.

And as he saw, he lay silent in emptiness, quiet in his congealed wonder. For here was splendor, these rank upon endless rank of beings, hanging in somber immovableness against that lightless sky. And here also was destiny.

Their formless thoughts flowed

around him, without discord, with peace.

"Golden lights," he whispered.

How long?

How long!

And from that concourse of golden-lighted energy-creatures came answer—from one or all, he would never know.

"For longer than you can dream, Oldster. For longer than the life of a star. You have slept, slept ages beyond calculation. Yet here, in this pulseless emptiness, we have found you. And the time of glory has come."

There was a rustling of thoughts, unfettered with fear, not chained to hope. And the golden central cores shone in beauty.

"The time of glory comes to you, Oldster."

Now that unlocated voice swelled, filling the darkness with its lordly sweetness.

"For see, Oldster! We are all you dreamed of—and more. We stem from Vanguard! And Vanguard gave life more than he dreamed. Clearly and purely we see the answers to those ultimate questions of life and death Darkness himself asked. Sun Destroyer, in her ancient past, never dreamed that her vain quest would be reached in us—through her!"

THE giant words drummed against Oldster. He quivered with sudden fear, searched among

those serenely watching beings with their crystal-sparkling, golden-lighted bodies for some thought that would make meaning burst on him. The answers did not come. And, in depraved ugliness, came doubt.

"No," he cried softly. "You speak of impossibilities! There are no answers. You are mockeries, and I want nothing of you—I do not want hope. Now leave me, leave me in my sadness!"

He lashed out at them, feeling his old agonies return, for they too were but atoms trampling over each other in that mad rush toward the bottom level of inertness. Even perfection must die, ruled by destiny.

He started to withdraw his vision when they, far from retreating, whirled nearer, their bright golden centers glowing in upon him until he was trapped in a blaze of fire. He stared, quivering with the dread that in spite of himself they would fill him with hope.

Then, thundering through his thought swirls, came that lordly measured voice, a voice sublime in the surety of its owner's purpose.

"Oldster! You have not failed!"

Involuntarily Oldster flung the words back.

"Not failed? You are mockeries, you golden lights. Not failed!" The words echoed in their frenzied dreariness. He felt the outer limits of his being expanding, quivering with miniscule flarings of yellow en-

ergy.

"I, Oldster, have failed in ways your blind minds could never perceive. You do not understand failure, you who stemmed from Vanguard. Could you ever feel the tortures of Vanguard himself—or of Sun Destroyer or Darkness? Ah, you have reached a perfection beyond such burrowings! And I shall not let you give me peace! For I have failed, and I shall continue to be tortured with my failures. You would not understand."

"We understand."

That voice, with its merciless love of him, drove in.

"We understand, and we say you have not failed. For see! You have created, and has not that driving urge to create been the great pain of your life?"

His thoughts swept out in blind denial. "I have not created."

"You created us."

The sublime voice vibrated sweetly on the emptiness. And deep in the fabric of Oldster was chaos.

"You created us, Oldster, as surely as if you had sired Darkness himself. For did you not guide Darkness to his life's completion? Was it not the thought of you that brought Sun Destroyer back along Darkness' path? And was it not you who guided Vanguard, you who, in your greatness, saw us in him? Yes, Oldster, you are our creator—you are the creator of life!

"And it is life that shall endure,

and has ultimate meaning."

Oldster hung laxly in that sphere of golden blaze. Deep within was a warning voice. But now he would not heed it. Not to rebel—ah, how sweet to accept!

He was theirs. Let it be so. Let them lead him to his life's completion. They, in their all-knowingness, could not be questioned. He had created. The thought held white and pure before him. Let the thought be so.

"Life that shall endure," he muttered.

"Life does endure!" The sublime voice rang. "Is not life the rebel from dead matter? Matter is death, Oldster, for it grows old and powders toward its entropic destiny. But life is the rebel. It builds, evolves toward its high destiny which we know, but which you cannot know. But this you shall know. Life masters itself. Life is outside destiny—and has choice!"

From somewhere, from a thousand different directions, Oldster felt the golden lights grasping at his thought swirls, filling him with that anesthetic peace he had known with Dark Fire, when he faced her in the band of life.

"Oldster." Inward hummed that lordly, loving voice. "Now you shall know you have not failed. For are you not life, and the greatest rebel of all life?"

"And life has within it the dark rebel!"

HE was transported to an unknown cosmos beyond time and space dimension. He was in the band of decision.

Again he looked upon those swinging suns. It was the same band, for which he had looked so long!

He drifted in that untrammelled vacuum, drank in the beauty of this faultless universe, its rounded glowing suns, and followed their quiet paths from one galaxy to another. Or were they not galaxies after all?

As those suns were not suns!

Not suns! Blindly his thoughts swept out.

"Then I have searched everywhere for my answers—except within myself!"

"Yes, Oldster." Distant, yet near, the sweet voice drifted in. "Now you inhabit that place you searched for. And it is a place that belongs to life alone."

The seeming-galaxies seemed to shimmer in answering accord.

"And now," cried Oldster, "my thoughts return to that moment when I trapped the universe's smallest particle in utter vacuum—and wondered if it could determine its own destiny. It could not!"

He drifted, his formless self somehow moving through these logically constructed "galaxies" toward some goal whose meaning hummed within him.

Then, echoing through and through this universe came the ringing voice that hovered outside him—

self.

"Now you see, Oldster, and know what it is you see. For life is the rebel, but dead matter knows no path but that given it.

"Oldster! Does not life have memory, emotion, volition? Do not even those functions need mechanism? Oldster—" the thought held no sadness, only an immeasurable love—"you know you have choice, and why you have choice. Now farewell! Your time of glory has come."

The fluttering of countless minds against his began to quiet. Without pain, he knew they were leaving—were gone—leaving the memory of their near-perfection, carrying with them the ultimate answers of life. And yet it did not matter. Did not matter!

He was within his fabled band of decision.

In mounting ecstasy, he hurled through those vast spaces that were yet small beyond calculation, went rushing toward his unseen goal. Those "galaxies," those mechanisms of which the golden lights spoke, slanted out behind him, and new ones rushed in to his sightless vision.

What old and new thoughts did those swinging "suns" evoke, what memories and dreams, in the slumbering conscious mind of that being who was called Oldster? Which configuration of "stars" and "galaxies" and what motion in and between them, called forth the haunting re-

membrances of Moon Flame, of Comet Glow and her twin child Dark Fire—of World Rim and the countless lost names of his unmeasured past?

Mind had mechanism. It could not be otherwise. And he inhabited, moved through, that band of decision.

And soon he would meet — his dark rebell

HIS ecstasy soared as he burst across those dimensionless distances, unerringly swung into a blaze of light created by a seeming-sphere of galaxies. And he halted, feeling the throb of his certain knowledge as he fixed his strange vision on the writhing heart of the farthest concourse of stars.

Instantly a lone sun heaved from it, moved across darkness. Oldster was in its path as instantly.

Even in the midst of that blinding hurt his ecstasy endured. He knew there was no pain, that he did not see, that he was not here.

Yet, what did it matter what symbols he chose, symbols that he understood, but which were not real?

The dark rebel was within him in this mechanism of mind. And mind has choice!

He watched that sun falter in mid-space, watched it reverse direction, and fall back, *with its message*, to the untroubled galaxy that had urged it forth. His joy was a mighty song as that particle, of it-

self, jousted with the destiny that bade it continue along its straight-angle course—fought and won!

That rebel particle was rushing, rushing, back to the heart of the deep-buried mechanism that ejected it. Soon it would strike. And there would be—explosion!

And for him, now, was the time of glory.

For that particle, that sun, was himself, as all these turning, studious galaxies were himself — the mind of him. What need to question himself now? Why question the manner in which he was given access to this glory under his conscious mind? The golden lights knew. But the minds of those golden lights—the descendants of Vanguard—were wrapped in a spiritual blaze beyond his comprehension.

His thoughts rolled on, growing rich within him as that falling sun hurled itself along its returning path.

"Darkness — Sun Destroyer — Vanguard—and Devil Star! Rebels all. Where are those who followed the worn paths? Gone, of no consequence. But you Darkness, you Sun Destroyer, you Vanguard—" almost he could see the shadowy pained shapes of them beckoning to him out of a past beyond recall—"have we not created as no other energy creature has created? For there are the golden lights."

His thoughts dreamed on, and the strangely visible "galaxies" of his

inner mind seemed to glitter their accord.

"The golden lights knew what you never knew, Darkness," he dreamed. "The answer to life itself. But even I, in these last moments, see some portion of that distant answer. Yes, Darkness! Life the rebel—the mighty force that combats the entropic gradient of the universe. Let the universe slope down, but life eternal moves upward, building on its own discarded forms. And life will rebuild all that is.

"Were we ourselves not changelings, mutations with strange powers? And it was the dark rebel within us that made us so! The dark rebel, that moves as it will . . ."

INTO him, from some outer circle of being, came shrill warning. He ignored it. Let the conscious mind of him thrash about, in terror of what was to happen. He would not return to it. He was here, his bodiless entity, watching mind function in dauntless disobedience to the laws lifeless destiny laid down.

He watched the fall of that glowing particle in rigid fascination. Now would come the rearrangement of this vast webwork about him. New thoughts, different emotions — and volition that thwarted destiny. For destiny's only death for a purple light came from a green.

But destiny could not rule life's dark rebel.

Again the warning, the clamorous scream to return, to fight. But he would have none of it. He felt a tender pity for that being whose conscious mind was obedient to what the stresses and strains of his vast body demanded. He would not return.

The dark rebel struck.

In the timeless moment of its striking, all space seemed to still. And the conscious mind of Oldster, that aged being, stilled as well. His animal struggles ceased. Alone in his mausoleum of darkness, he was filled with a pulsing wonder. He felt the force-fields girding him together lose their prime energy.

And then expansion.

"I am dying," he whispered.

He looked about him, peering into the darkness that would show him nothing. And suddenly he remembered that which he had seen in his inner being. The dark rebel, falling, falling, striking. The cataclysm that followed, the white light

of explosion, the pell-mell exchange of suns. The rearrangement of desire.

And in full measure the meaning of that astounding event came. The thought hummed, swelled, until he was flinging it out beyond him in mocking wave after wave, into the face of that universe that had mocked him with its dead answers. In this last moment of expansion the pain and formless searching of his years vanished in the ultimate triumph. He had had choice between two events, being and not-being.

And as all thoughts that had ever been and were a part of him raced through his mind in that final moment, he caught one infinitesimal thought, one he had spawned in a long gone eternity. "*To be or not to be—that is the question . . .*"

And he knew the answer. The age-old answer he had long sought. It was a matter of choice.

And he was content to die now, having chosen . . .

THE END

The Editorial . . .

issue of "Madge" with his hilarious dream-girl, "Toffee." We're very proud of Charlie Myers, and intend to give you more stories from his talented pen in the near future.

ALSO, next issue (on sale the 1st week in February) you will have a photographic cover. Yes, that's what we said! It's a lulu of a

(Concluded from page 5)
print, made by famed cover artist Malcolm Smith. Malcolm colored the print with dyes, and we think he did a marvelous job. And the lead story, around that cover will be our protegee, Geoff St. Reynard. All of which adds up to the fact that you've got a big treat in store for you. . . .
WLH.

"SHADOW, SHADOW,

By Theodore Sturgeon

Mommy Gwen was angry with Bobby, so she locked him in his room without his toys. But he could still play—with the *thing* on the wall . . .



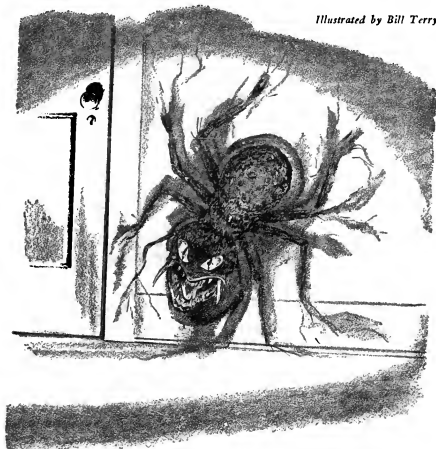
ON THE WALL...

IT was well after bed-time and Bobby was asleep, dreaming of a place with black butterflies that stayed, and a dog with a wuffy nose and blunt, friendly rubber teeth. It was a dark place, and comfy,

with all the edges blurred and soft, and he could make them all jump if he wanted to.

But then there was a sharp scythe of light that swept everything away (except in the shaded

Illustrated by Bill Terry



Bobby clapped his hands in glee as the shadow-creature pulsed in its wall prison

smoothness of the blank wall beside the door: someone *always* lived there) and Mommy Gwen was coming into the room with a blaze of hallway behind her. She clicked the high-up switch, the one he couldn't reach, and room light came cruelly. Mommy Gwen changed from a flat, black, light-rimmed set of cardboard triangles to a night-lit, daytime sort of Mommy Gwen.

Her hair was wide and her chin was narrow. Her shoulders were wide and her waist was narrow. Her hips were wide and her skirt was narrow, and under it all were her two hard silky sticks of legs. Her arms hung down from the wide tips of her shoulders, straight and elbowless when she walked. She never moved her arms when she walked. She never moved them at all unless she wanted to do something with them.

"You're awake." Her voice was hard, wide, flat, pointy too.

"I was asleep," said Bobby.

"Don't contradict. Get up."

Bobby sat up and fisted his eyes. "Is Daddy—"

"Your father is not in the house. He went away. He won't be back for a whole day—maybe two. So there's no use in yelling for him."

"Wasn't going to yell for him, Mommy Gwen."

"Very well, then. Get up."

Wondering, Bobby got up. His flannel sleeper pulled at his shoulders and at the soles of his snug-

covered feet. He felt tousled.

"Get your toys, Bobby."

"What toys, Mommy Gwen?"

Her voice snapped like wet clothes on the line in a big wind. "Your toys—all of them!"

He went to the playbox and lifted the lid. He stopped, turned, stared at her. Her arms hung straight at her sides, as straight as her two level eyes under the straight shelf of brow. He bent to the playbox. Gollywick, Humptydoodle and the blocks came out; the starry-wormy piece of the old phonograph, the cracked sugar egg with the peep-hole girl in it, the cardboard kaleidoscope and the magic set with the seven silvery rings that made a trick he couldn't do but Daddy could. He took them all out and put them on the floor.

"Here," said Mommy Gwen. She moved one straight-line arm to point to her feet with one straight-line finger. He picked up the toys and brought them to her, one at a time, two at a time, until they were all there. "Neatly, neatly," she muttered. She bent in the middle like a garage door and did brisk things with the toys, so that the scattered pile of them became a square stack. "Get the rest," she said.

HE looked into the playbox and took out the old wood-framed slate and the mixed-up box of crayons, the English annual story book and an old candle, and that was

all for the playbox. In the closet were some little boxing-gloves and a tennis-racket with broken strings, and an old Ukelele with no strings at all. And that was all for the closet. He brought them to her, and she stacked them with the others.

"Those things too," she said, and at last bent her elbow to point around. From the dresser came the two squirrels and a monkey that Daddy had made from pipe cleaners, a small square of plate-glass he had found on Henry Street; a clockwork top that sounded like a church talking, and the broken clock Jerry had left on the porch last week. Bobby brought them all to Mommy Gwen, every one. "Are you going to put me in another room?"

"No indeed." Mommy Gwen took up the neat stack of toys. It was tall in her arms. The top fell off and thunked on the floor, bounced, chased around in a tilted circle. "Get it," said Mommy Gwen.

Bobby picked it up and reached it toward her. She stooped until he could put it on the stack, snug between the tennis racket and the box of crayons. Mommy Gwen didn't say thank-you, but went away through the door, leaving Bobby standing, staring after her. He heard her hard feet go down the hall, heard the bump as she pressed open the guest-room door with her knee. There was a rattle and click as she set his toys down on the spare bed,

the one without a spread, the one with dusty blue ticking on the mattress. Then she came back again.

"Why aren't you in bed?" She clapped her hands. They sounded dry, like sticks breaking. Startled, he popped back into bed and drew the covers up to his chin. There used to be someone who had a warm cheek and a soft word for him when he did that, but that was a long time ago. He lay with his eyes round in the light, looking at Mommy Gwen.

"You've been bad," she said. "You broke a window in the shed and you tracked mud into my kitchen and you've been noisy and rude. So you'll stay right here in this room without your toys until I say you can come out. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," he said. He said quickly, because he remembered in time, "Yes ma'am."

She struck the switch swiftly, without warning, so that the darkness dazzled him, made him blink. But right away it was the room again, with the scythe of light and the shaded something hiding in the top corner of the wall by the door. There was always something shifting about there.

She went away then, thumping the door closed, leaving the darkness and taking away the light, all but a rug-fuzzed yellow streak under the door. Bobby looked away from that, and for a moment, for

just a moment, he was inside his shadow-pictures where the rubber-fanged dog and the fleshy black butterflies stayed. Sometimes they stayed . . . but mostly they were gone as soon as he moved. Or maybe they changed into something else. Anyway, he liked it there, where they all lived, and he wished he could be with them, in the shadow country.

Just before he fell asleep, he saw them moving and shifting in the blank wall by the door. He smiled at them and went to sleep.

WHEN he awoke, it was early. He couldn't smell the coffee from downstairs yet, even. There was a ruddy-yellow sun-swath on the blank wall, a crooked square, just waiting for him. He jumped out of bed and ran to it. He washed his hands in it, squatted down on the floor with his arms out. "Now!" he said.

He locked his thumbs together and slowly flapped his hands. And there on the wall was a black butterfly, flapping its wings right along with him. "Hello, butterfly," said Bobby.

He made it jump. He made it turn and settle to the bottom of the light patch, and fold its wings up and up until they were together. Suddenly he whipped one hand away, peeled back the sleeve of his sleeper, and presto! there was a long-necked duck. "Quack-ack!"

said Bobby, and the duck obligingly opened its bill, threw up its head to quack. Bobby made it curl up its bill until it was an eagle. He didn't know what kind of noise an eagle made, so he said "Eagle-eagle-eagle-eagle," and that sounded fine. He laughed.

When he laughed Mommy Gwen slammed the door open and stood there in a straight-lined white bathrobe and straight flat slippers. "What are you playing with?"

Bobby held up his empty hands. "I was just—"

She took two steps into the room. "Get up," she said. Her lips were pale. Bobby got up, wondering why she was so angry. "I heard you laugh," she said in a hissy kind of whisper. She looked him up and down, looked at the floor around him. "What were you playing with?"

"A eagle," said Bobby.

"A what? Tell me the truth!"

Bobby waved his empty hands vaguely and looked away from her. She had such an angry face.

She stepped, reached, put a hard hand around his wrist. She lifted his arm so high he went on tiptoes, and with her other hand she felt his body, this side, that side. "You're hiding something. What is it? Where is it? What were you playing with?"

"Nothing. Reely, reely truly nothing," gasped Bobby as she shook and patted. She wasn't spanking.

She never spanked. She did other things.

"You're being punished," she said in her shrill angry whisper. "Stupid, stupid, stupid . . . too stupid to know you're being punished." She set him down with a thump and went to the door. "Don't let me hear you laugh again. You've been bad, and you're not being kept in this room to enjoy yourself. Now you stay here and think about how bad you are breaking windows. Tracking mud. Lying."

She went out and closed the door with a steadiness that was like slamming, but quiet. Bobby looked at the door and wondered for a moment about that broken window. He'd been terribly sorry; it was just that the golf-ball bounced so hard. Daddy had told him he should be more careful, and he had watched sorrowfully while Daddy put in a new pane. Then Daddy had given him a little piece of putty to play with and asked him never to do it again and he'd promised not to. And the whole time Mommy Gwen hadn't said a thing to him about it. She'd just looked at him every once in a while with her eyes and her mouth straight and thin, and she'd waited. She'd waited until Daddy went away.

He went back to his sunbeam and forgot all about Mommy Gwen.

AFTER he'd made another butterfly and a dog's head and

an alligator on the wall, the sunbeam got so thin that he couldn't make anything more, except, for a while, little black finger shadows that ran up and down the strip of light like ants on a match-stick. Soon there was no sunbeam at all, so he sat on the edge of his bed and watched the vague flickering of the something that lived in the end wall. It was a *different* kind of something. It wasn't a good something, and it wasn't bad. It just lived there, and the difference between it and the other things, the butterflies and dogs and swans and eagles who lived there, was that the something didn't need his hands to make it be alive. The something—staycd. Some day he was going to make a butterfly or a dog or a horse that would stay after he moved his hands away. Meanwhile, the only one who stayed, the only one who lived all the time in the shadow country, was this something that flickered up there where the two walls met the ceiling. "I'm going right in there and play with you," Bobby told it. "You'll see."

There was a red wagon with three wheels in the yard, and a gnarly tree to be climbed. Jerry came and called for a while, but Mommy Gwen sent him away. "*He's been bad.*" So Jerry went away.

Bad bad bad. Funny how the things he did didn't used to be bad before Daddy married Mommy Gwen.

Mommy Gwen didn't want Bobby. That was all right—Bobby didn't want Mommy Gwen either. Daddy sometimes said to grown-up people that Bobby was much better off with someone to care for him. Bobby could remember 'way back when he used to say that with his arm around Mommy Gwen's shoulders and his voice ringing. He could remember when Daddy said it quietly, from the other side of the room, with a voice like an angry "I'm sorry." And now, Daddy hadn't said it at all for a long time.

Bobby sat on the edge of his bed and hummed to himself, thinking these thoughts, and he hummed to himself and didn't think of anything at all. He found a ladybug crawling up the dresser and caught it the careful way, circling it with his thumb and finger so that it crawled up on his hand by itself. Sometimes when you pinched them up they got busted. He stood on the windowsill and hunted until he found the little hole in the screen that the ladybug must have used to come in. He let the bug walk on the screen and guided it to the hole. It flew away, happy.

The room was flooded with warm dull light reflected from the sparkly black shed roof, and he couldn't make any shadow country people at all, so he made them in his head until he felt sleepy. He lay down then and hummed softly to himself until he fell asleep. And through

the long afternoon the thing in the wall flickered and shifted and lived.

AT dusk Mommy Gwen came back. Bobby may have heard her on the stairs: anyway, when the door opened on the dim room he was sitting up in bed, thumbing his eyes.

The ceiling blazed. "What have you been doing?"

"Was asleep, I guess. Is it night time?"

"Very nearly. I suppose you're hungry." She had a covered dish.

"Mmm."

"What kind of an answer is that?" she snapped.

"Yes ma'am I'm hungry Mommy Gwen," he said rapidly.

"That's a little better. Here." She thrust the dish at him. He took it, removed the top plate and put it under the bowl. Oatmeal. He looked at it, at her.

"Well?"

"Thank you, Mommy Gwen." He began to eat with the teaspoon he had found hilt-deep in the grey-brown mess. There was no sugar on it.

"I suppose you expect me to fetch you some sugar," she said after a time.

"No'm," he said truthfully, and then wondered why her face went all angry and disappointed.

"What have you been doing all day?"

"Nothing. Playin'. Then I was asleep."

"Little sluggard." Suddenly she shouted at him, "What's the matter with you? Are you too stupid to be afraid? Are you too stupid to ask me to let you come downstairs? Are you too stupid to cry? Why won't you cry?"

He stared at her, roundeyed. "You wouldn't let me come down if I ast you," he said wonderingly. "So I din't ast." He scooped up some oatmeal. "I don't feel like cryin,' Mommy Gwen, I don't hurt."

"You're bad and you're being punished and it should hurt," she said furiously. She turned off the light with a vicious swipe of her hard straight hand, and went out, slamming the door.

Bobby sat still in the dark and wished he could go into the shadow country, the way he always dreamed he could. He'd go there and play with the butterflies and the fuzz-edged, blunt-toothed dogs and giraffes, and they'd stay and he'd stay and Mommy Gwen would never be able to get in, ever. Except that Daddy wouldn't be able to come with him, or Jerry either, and that would be a shame.

HE scrambled quietly out of bed and stood for a moment looking at the wall by the door. He could almost for-sure see the flickering thing that lived there, even in the dark. When there was light

on the wall, it flickered a shade darker than the light. At night it flickered a shade lighter than the black. It was always there, and Bobby knew it was alive. He knew it without question, like "my name is Bobby" and "Mommy Gwen doesn't want me."

Quietly, quietly, he tiptoed to the other side of the room where there was a small table lamp. He took it down and laid it carefully on the floor. He pulled the plug out and brought it down under the lower rung of the table so it led straight across the floor to the wall-receptacle, and plugged it in again. Now he could move the lamp quite far out into the room, almost to the middle.

The lamp had a round shade that was open at the top. Lying on its side, the shade pointed its open top at the blank wall by the door. Bobby, with the sureness of long practice, moved in the darkness to his closet and got his dark-red flannel bathrobe from a low hook. He folded it once and draped it over the large lower end of the lampshade. He pushed the button.

On the shadow country wall appeared a brilliant disk of light, crossed by just the hints of the four wires that held the shade in place. There was a dark spot in the middle where they met.

Bobby looked at it critically. Then, squatting between the lamp and the wall, he put out his hand.

A duck. "Quackle-ackle," he whispered.

An eagle. "Eagle - eagle - eagle-eagle," he said softly.

An alligator. "Bap bap," the alligator went as it opened and closed its long snout.

He withdrew his hands and studied the round, cross-scarred light on the wall. The blurred center shadow and its radiating lines looked a little like a water-bug, the kind that can run on the surface of a brook. It soon dissatisfied him; it just sat there without doing anything. He put his thumb in his mouth and bit it gently until an idea came to him. Then he scrambled to the bed, underneath which he found his slippers. He put one on the floor in front of the lamp, and propped the other toe-upwards against it. He regarded the wall gravely for a time, and then lay flat on his stomach on the floor. Watching the shadow carefully, he put his elbows together on the carpet, twined his forearms together and merged the shadow of his hands with the shadow of the slipper.

THE result enchanted him. It was something like a spider, and something like a gorilla. It was a brand-new something that no one had ever seen before. He writhed his fingers and then held them still, and now the thing's knobby head had triangular luminous eyes and a jaw that swung, gaping. It had long

arms for reaching and a delicate whorl of tentacles. He moved the least little bit, and it wagged its great head and blinked at him. Watching it, he felt suddenly that the flickering thing that lived in the high corner had crept out and down toward the beast he had made, closer and closer to it until—whoosh!—it noiselessly merged with the beast, an act as quick and complete as the marriage of raindrops on a windowpane.

Bobby crowed with delight. "Stay, stay," he begged. "Oh, stay there! I'll pet you! I'll give you good things to eat! Please stay, please!"

The thing glowered at him. He thought it would stay, but he didn't chance moving his hands away just yet.

The door crashed open, the switch clicked, the room filled with an explosion of light.

"What are you doing?"

Bobby lay frozen, his elbows on the carpet in front of him, his forearms together, his hands twisted oddly. He put his chin on his shoulder so he could look at her standing there stiff and menacing. "I was—was just—"

She swooped down on him. She snatched him up off the floor and plumped him down on the bed. She kicked and scattered his slippers. She snatched up the lamp, pulling the cord out of the wall with the motion. "You were not to have any toys," she said in the hissing

voice. "That means you were not to make any toys. For this you'll stay in here for—what are you staring at?"

Bobby spread his hands and brought them together ecstatically, holding tight. His eyes sparkled, and his small white teeth peeped out so that they could see what he was smiling at. "He stayed, he did," said Bobby. "He stayed!"

"I don't know what you're talking about and I will not stay here to find out," snapped Mommy Gwen. "I think you're a mental case." She marched to the door, striking the high switch.

The room went dark—except for that blank wall by the door.

Mommy Gwen screamed.

Bobby covered his eyes.

Mommy Gwen screamed again, hoarsely this time. It was a sound like a dog's bark, but drawn out and out.

There was a long silence. Bobby peeped through his fingers at the dimly glowing wall. He took his hands down, sat up straight, drew his knees up to his chest and put

his arms around them. "Well," he said.

Feet pounded up the stairs. "Gwen! Gwen!"

"Hello, Daddy."

Daddy ran in, turning on the light. "Where's Mommy Gwen, Bob boy? What happened? I heard a—"

Bobby pointed at the wall. "She's in there," he said.

Daddy couldn't have understood him, for he turned and ran out the door calling "Gwen! Gwen!"

Bobby sat still and watched the fading shadow on the wall, quite visible even in the blaze of the overhead light. The shadow was moving, moving. It was a point-down triangle thrust into another point-down triangle which was mounted on a third, and underneath were the two hard sticks of legs. It had its arms up, its shadow-fists clenched, and it pounded and pounded silently on the wall.

"Now I'm never going into the shadow country," said Bobby complacently. "She's there."

So he never did.

COMING NEXT ISSUE:—

"DRINK MY RED BLOOD . . . "

By RICHARD MATHESON

We are proud to present this new thriller by the very talented author of "Born of Man and Woman". We predict that this grim little story will rank as one of your all time favorites. You may shudder, but you'll enjoy it! So watch for the next big issue on sale at your newsstand, February 1st.

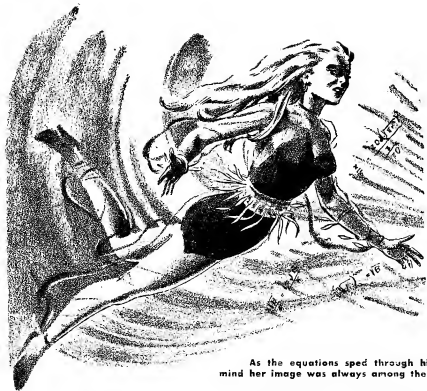
MAID-TO ORDER!

By **HAL ANNAS**

Herb Cornith didn't really mind getting married as long as the girl answered his strict specifications which were simply—a superwoman!



Illustrated by Bill Terry



As the equations sped through his mind her image was always among them

HERB Cornith shook his dark head in disappointment. "Nope," he said, "she won't do. Lacks an ounce of being the right weight."

The willowy blonde behind the desk blinked blue eyes and frowned. "But Mr. Cornith," she insisted, "you fit Miss Lucy Hollowell's specifications perfectly. She even specified that the man must be very exacting, meticulous and choosy. Certainly you are being all of that when you quibble over an ounce in her weight."

Cornith picked up the specification sheet in his muscular right hand. He studied it out of thoughtful brown eyes. "This doesn't look right," he said. "I'll admit that I have strong features, but I'm not handsome."

"To a woman, you are handsome, Mr. Cornith. In fact, magnetically so."

"I'm only six feet tall, not seventy-three inches."

"That is a typographical error, Mr. Cornith. It should read seventy-two inches. The corrected copy

should be along soon. Something went wrong with the machine."

"And my eyes are not particularly expressive. I generally conceal my thoughts."

"That, Mr. Cornith, is merely your own opinion. You don't know what expression you might put into your eyes when you look into the eyes of your soul-mate."

"The eyes of my what?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Cornith. I know you're not the poetic type. You're the rugged type, but brainy, realistic. Still, you fit the specifications."

"You said there was another sheet to the specifications?"

"Yes. It won't be finished until tomorrow. But let me assure you that it fits you. In fact, it describes your every virtue and fault."

Cornith glanced round the large room. His brown eyes came to rest on a model of an early Martian rocket ship. He studied it for a space, mentally seeing its interior and its outmoded atomic drive. It reminded him that he should get back to the laboratory and check on those ray-collector tests. This business of dicker over specifications for a wife was a nuisance. His requirements had been on file since he had taken the Levet test at the age of eighteen. Because of his exacting nature they had been hard to fill. Now at twenty-seven he was still unmarried. Not that he cared. But by reason of the fact that he

was of the higher mental level, and physically fitted to survive in a complex and expanding civilization, he was urged by the Foundation to marry and beget children.

THIS was the accepted procedure. Marriage was seldom discouraged, but it was urged only on those who came up to certain specifications. The purpose was to improve mankind in order that man might hold his own in a solar system that was even now reaching out toward the stars. The system had long been in effect on Mars, but owing to the colder climate and the thinner atmosphere, Mars had less than a tenth the population of earth. Selective breeding alone had enabled these to survive.

"Sorry," Cornith said. "This Lucy Hollowell fits everything except she is too skinny. I don't want a bag of bones for a wife."

The blonde smiled wryly. "She is only a half-ounce under the specifications, to be exact. Perhaps you have not carefully read your requirements. Let me remind you, Mr. Cornith, the Foundation probed your every thought, conscious and subconscious, your every physical reaction, and they specified merely that the girl must be unusually intelligent, naming the subjects which will fit into your pattern; that she must be beautiful according to your standards; that she must be five-feet four-inches tall

and weigh a hundred and twenty-three pounds.

"Now, Mr. Cornith, there is one little thing which the Foundation has decided that you implanted in your thoughts by suggestion before taking the test. They decided that you were being facetious. I am alluding to the specified requirements that your wife must be able to wiggle her ears, throw her voice and perform sleight-of-hand tricks, among other curious things. The Foundation says that these things may not be essentially required. But they do admit the requirement that she must be eager to please you at all times. And since it is Lucy Hollowell's nature to be eager to please the man she marries, she is even now practicing ventriloquism and learning how to wiggle her ears. She has a brilliant mind and will have no difficulty learning a number of sleight-of-hand tricks."

"But she's too skinny!"

"Half an ounce, Mr. Cornith. She weighs a hundred and twenty-two pounds, fifteen ounces. She could very easily gain that ounce by making an effort, but you specified that there should be no conscious effort to meet physical measurements and weight requirements. She was to be weighed, dripping wet, as she came from under the shower, just before breakfast. We assume that the wetness weighed half an ounce."

"I don't like skinny females."

"We have another one, less bril-

liant, but who meets all physical requirements other than weighing a hundred and twenty-three pounds and four ounces."

"Too fat. Can't stand fat women."

"Would you permit Lucy Hollowell to gain half an ounce consciously? She can do it in a few hours. Has a brilliant mind. Can regulate her own glandular flow."

"No. I don't want to marry a woman who is always thinking about her weight, and if she starts now—"

"You're very exacting, Mr. Cornith!"

"Naturally. The requirements of Lucy Hollowell demand an exacting man. At least that's what the Foundation reports."

"Then you are giving her serious thought?"

"**N**ONE whatever! She's too skinny. If she just had an ounce more meat on her bones, I'd marry her and not even ask her name. But I don't want to live the balance of my days with a female who looks like an animated skeleton, who has to stand twice in the same spot to cast a shadow, who has to drink tomato juice to keep you from looking through her."

"How about the woman of the same height who weighs a hundred and twenty-three pounds, four ounces."

"A beef-trust like that! Count me out. She'd cast her shadow twice. It would take a week to hug her,

a little at a time. She'd shake the house down every time she walked across the floor. Impossible to keep her in clothes. I'd need a nylon and linen factory to supply the material for one outfit. No! I'd rather have a skeleton than a whale."

"Then you'll consider Lucy Hollowell?"

"I didn't say that. I wouldn't mind taking a look at her from a distance, because if she does fit the other specifications she must be something out of a dream. Too bad she has to be built like a rail."

"Not like a rail, Mr. Cornith."

"A skeleton then."

"Not like a skeleton, either. She is Miss Venus of 2190."

"What? You mean, this gawky Lucy Hollowell is the same as that gorgeous bundle of curves and pulchritude?"

"Exactly. And now you're interested, huh?"

"No. She doesn't meet the specifications."

"But you'll let her come over to the laboratory and watch you work, won't you? After all, you meet her requirements."

"No! I don't want any walking bean-poles around the laboratory."

"But maybe she wouldn't appear just that."

"She's underweight."

"According to your requirements—only. Thousands of men think she is perfect. And she's going to be mighty disappointed if her

dream man—"

"Her what?"

"Sorry. I forgot you're not the poetic type. She doesn't think of you as her dream man, but she does think of you as being everything she wants in a man. You'll let her come to the laboratory, won't you?"

"No."

"But she does at least want to see you. Do you know you are the only man out of thousands who exactly meets her requirements? Even to those crinkles in your forehead when you frown. And even to being stubborn about things."

"I've got to get back and check those ray-collectors—"

"And you'll let her go along with you?"

"No."

"But she's waiting in the next office, and your requirements call for a woman who has a mind of her own. I think she's—"

"Not a mind of her own that makes her determined to have her own way in everything."

"Of course not. But I think she's—"

"I specified a woman who would not try to wear the pants."

"She won't. That is, not yours, anyway. Though you're too big for them. But I think she's going with you to the laboratory."

"**THAT'S** what you think," Cornith said with finality and

stood up. "No long, lean, gawky drink-of-water is going to tag along after Herb Cornith. Especially a female bag of bones. Uh! Excuse me. Who is the lady who just entered without knocking?"

"Oh! Just a second. Miss Hollowell, Mr. Cornith was just getting ready to come by for you. Miss Hollowell, Mr. Cornith."

Cornith drew a deep breath and ran a finger beneath his collar. He stared, drinking in the beauty of the symmetrical figure beneath the rose-colored dress, the radiance of the smooth features. He had seen her before, but only in a vague dream in which she was far more lovely than the telecast views of Miss Venus, but in the dream she had not done to him what she was doing now. She acted upon him much as a single-pole magnet does to a magnet of opposite polarity. More, she seemed stunned herself. Her lips parted slightly, revealing white teeth, and her deep azure eyes seemed to be saying things that only eyes can say.

"A pleasure," Cornith said, enclosing her small warm hand in his. "I was just telling Miss—" He gestured toward the girl behind the desk. "I was just telling her that I—er, I, uh."

"You're going to the laboratory," Lucy Hollowell said, more as a direct reading of his thoughts than as a question.

Cornith smiled, nodded. "Care to

come along?"

Lucy Hollowell withdrew her hand and a deck of cards materialized from nowhere and spread out fanwise between her small thumb and forefinger. Cornith gaped. In the next instant his attention was attracted to her ears which peeked from beneath silken platinum hair. The ears were wiggling enchantingly.

Flushed and hot, Cornith reached to his breast pocket for a handkerchief. He was astonished to find a large Spanish rose protruding from the pocket. He held it in his hand and stared at it in stunned silence. Lucy Hollowell extended a small white hand and took the rose from him. She held it against her cheek until he saw that her lips and the rose were the same color. Then she fastened it in her platinum hair where its warm red petals contrasted brilliantly.

"Er, uh. I was saying—" Cornith began lamely.

"That she's a bag of bones," a voice behind him finished.

Cornith whirled, and the same voice in a distant part of the room said, "Over here!" Cornith jumped. He puzzled for a moment and then it dawned over him that those small voices had the same deep huskiness that Lucy Hollowell's voice had. He turned back to her and smiled weakly.

"You were inviting me to go to the laboratory with you?" Lucy

said.

Cornith nodded. "Thought it might interest—" He broke off abruptly, his mouth hanging open. He could not believe his ears. He was hearing his own voice, or a fair imitation of it, repeating his earlier words, "Gawky . . . beanpole . . . tagging . . ."

"Stop that!" he said abruptly.

SILENCE reigned and Lucy Hollowell remained in rigid immobility. And while Cornith stared, her peachblown cheeks became pink, then red. The veins in her lovely neck swelled and throbbed. She turned slowly on tottering legs and gently collapsed into Cornith's arms.

"What th—?" He twisted his neck and looked at the blonde in frantic appeal. "What's the matter with her? Can't you do something?"

"Your requirements demand," the blonde replied unemotionally, "a woman who is very obedient. When you told her to 'stop that!' she stopped everything, including breathing."

"Oh!" Cornith sighed in relief. "So that's it!"

"Better tell her to begin breathing again," the blonde said casually.

"But the requirements shouldn't be taken that literally," Cornith argued.

"She won't take everything literally. An understanding between you

will straighten that out. But meanwhile, you'd better tell her to breathe again."

Cornith looked down at the lovely face which had now regained its normal peachblown color. He was astonished to see a tiny bit of deep azure beneath an eyelid that wasn't quite closed. Instantly the lid closed tightly, quivered a trifle and remained shut. Cornith's mind worked swiftly, reconstructing events from the beginning, and he recalled the swelling veins, the careful turning to fall into his arms, the flushed cheeks which were not the color that normally precedes fainting. He noticed now the shallow, controlled breathing, and he felt a slight tremor in the soft warm body he held in his arms.

Drawing her close, Cornith said. "This ought to make her snap out of it," and pressed his lips firmly against hers.

"No, no, Mr. Cornith!" the blonde exclaimed. "The requirements say that she is supposed to swoon when you do that."

It was true. Lucy Hollowell seemed to revive and then swoon in ecstasy. She slumped limply in Cornith's arms while a faint tremor ran through her warm body. To make certain the results were mathematically precise, Cornith tried again, kissing her a little more firmly this time. The response was the same. In the interest of science, he tested the matter a third time, and then

turned raptly to the blonde.

"Look! She swoons everytime I kiss her."

"Naturally, Mr. Cornith," the blonde commented a trifle bitterly. "Your requirements demand that, even though it is thought by some members of the Foundation that you were in a facetious mood when you took the Levet examination. They suspect that you implanted a large number of suggestions prior to the event, to bias your responses in a manner not in keeping with the seriousness of the occasion. That is not a problem for this department. We have provided you with a woman who fulfills every requirement stated—"

"She's underweight," Cornith insisted.

"Does she look too thin?"

"No! She's perfect. But she lacks an ounce—"

SMAACK! A small white hand struck Cornith's cheek resoundingly and brought the blood stinging to the surface. He almost dropped the girl. She got her long, slender legs under her and supported her own weight. Smack! Another small hand caught Cornith stinging on the other cheek. He drew a deep breath, felt his muscles contracting.

"Now, now, Mr. Cornith!" the blonde warned. "The specifications demand that your wife shall have plenty of fire."

"That doesn't give her a right to knock my head off," Cornith blustered. "Besides, she's not my wife!"

"Are you hurt, darling?" Lucy Hollowell said sympathetically. "I'm sorry! Here! Let me kiss your cheeks and make them well."

"What th—?"

"Now, now, Mr. Cornith! She's supposed to be sympathetic and understanding and very tender when you need her."

"I don't need that sort of sympathy and understanding."

"Look!" Lucy Hollowell cupped his chin in one soft hand and forced him to look at her. "My ears!" They were wiggling again in rhythm with the soft strains of a waltz coming from some hidden source.

"Stop that! No, no, no! Don't stop breathing. Just stop wiggling your ears. Don't faint. Stand still. And stop plucking coins out of the air. And if that's you making that music, stop that, too."

Silence reigned. Lucy Hollowell remained perfectly still. The expression on her lovely features was one of interest and concern. Her ripe lips quivered slightly. "You don't like me?" she said.

"I do, too."

Instantly the girl was all over Cornith, hugging him and kissing him at the same time and murmuring endearments.

"Hey!"

"Now, now, Mr. Cornith. She's

supposed to be very responsive to words of love."

"I didn't say anything about love."

"You said you liked her."

"I merely said, 'I do, too.'"

"But she's supposed to understand even when you don't put everything in words."

"When is she supposed to stop this—this necking?"

"She will let you alone when you want to be let alone."

Lucy Hollowell stepped back, patted her platinum hair and glanced at her image in a small mirror. Then she smiled sweetly at Cornith and returned to his side. "Shall we go?" she said.

This sudden change in mood and recovery of self-possession, after her demonstration of a moment before, was more than Cornith could readily grasp. The blonde supplied the answer.

"Her moods change with the situation and needs of the moment."

CORNITH scratched his dark head. "I don't know," he commented reflectively. "I didn't think any woman in the world would fit the requirements I put in. At eighteen I thought the whole idea was stupid. I didn't want to get married."

"Of course," Lucy said understandingly. "You still think those examinations and tests and specifications are stupid. I understand.

And you put in a lot of things you didn't want. But I had to meet the requirements, and my reactions and responses had to be some actual part of me, not ad lib. I can change them in time."

"She's very understanding, Mr. Cornith, and eager to please."

"But it's all nonsense," Cornith insisted.

"Of course it is," Lucy said sympathetically. "It isn't right for you to have to marry a girl who meets all of the requirements you didn't want. I know just how you feel, and after we're married we'll work together to amend the Foundation regulations."

"I didn't say I'd marry you."

"Of course you didn't. And it isn't fair for you to have to do it. I know just how you feel. And I'll comfort you all I can. Here you have a woman on your hands whose reactions are everything you thought was silly. Because you're a scientist and don't like nonsense. At least, not too much of it. And you put all those things in, thinking that everybody would see how silly they were. You didn't think anybody would be stupid enough actually to be like that. I feel so sorry for you, having to marry a woman with all those silly things ingrained in her reactions."

"We're not married yet."

"That's the worst part. It's that anxiety before an event of doubtful outcome. I'm so sorry, darling!

Put your head here on my breast and let me comfort you."

"Dash it!"

"Now, now, Mr. Cornith. The specifications . . . a woman of deep feeling . . . ready to comfort."

"Dash it! Dash it! Dash it!"

"Now, now, Mr. Cornith! If you give 'way to your feelings, no telling what might happen. That's one of the things you didn't anticipate. There's nothing in the specifications—"

"Here!" Lucy opened her handbag and drew out a flask. "You need a drink. Brace up. There are worse things than being married."

"I don't drink." Cornith seized the flask and tossed off a swallow. "Ah! Martian Vinth! Never touch the stuff." He took another swallow. "Now I don't have to marry you. I deliberately specified that my wife should not be a Vinth sot."

"Herb darling, you're so clever! I detest the stuff. But I happened to know that scientists drink it to strengthen their minds and to keep their health up. I brought it along to prove how thoughtful I am. I also have in my handbag a length of chewing rope."

Cornith shook his head. "I don't chew, but you go right ahead."

LUCY shook her head. "Too bad. I chew, drink, smoke, brawl, swear, lie, steal, eat with my knife, and throw things. All in the specifications. I do everything except

drink Vinth. Too bad you don't. We could have so much fun together, chewing and drinking and lying and stealing and fighting and throwing things."

"But I didn't mean all those things."

"Of course you didn't, darling! and I'm so sorry you put them in. But what's done is done, and there's no use worrying about it. Take another drink and brace up."

Cornith took another drink and returned the flask. He felt better now. The Martian Vinth had both a soothing and exhilarating effect. The things that had seemed so stupid a moment before now seemed reasonable.

"All right," he said. "If you do all of those things, you qualify. Let's have a specimen lie to see how good you are."

"I hate you!"

"Now wait! Don't fly off the handle."

"But darling! I was merely giving you a sample lie."

"You mean, you love me?"

"No."

"Then why do you want to marry me?"

"I don't."

"Oh! I see. You're lying."

"Of course."

"Tell the truth. Do you love me?"

"Now, now, Mr. Cornith! There's nothing in the specifications about telling the truth about anything at

any time whatever."

"Oh, my Gawd!" The full realization of the awful truth shook Cornith, froze the mellow glow the Martian Vinth had instilled. "I didn't include any good qualities at all in the specifications!"

"And I'm so sorry," Lucy said tenderly. "Because I could very easily have trained myself to be good, to be all of the things you wanted. But I had to follow the specifications. It was the only way I could qualify. Maybe I can change—in five or ten years."

Cornith shook his head sadly. "In five or ten years it won't matter one way or another."

"Then you're going to marry me and get used to me?"

"No."

"But Herb, darling! I've worked so hard making myself all of the silly things your specifications demanded. Nobody else will want a woman like that. Besides, I've been in love with you ever since you worked out the formula for canning cosmic rays."

"You remember that?"

"Of course. Saw you for the first time then, in televue. You reminded me of something I'd been dreaming."

"What?"

"Tell you after we're married."

"I'm not going to marry you."

"You'll have to. I can pass all the requirements. Here's your wallet I stole out of your pocket ten

minutes ago. And the law says—"

"But you're an ounce underweight."

"Are you going to let a little thing like that—?"

LUCY halted abruptly and Cornith smiled serenely. "Sure," he said. "The specifications require the female to weigh a hundred and twenty-three pounds, dripping wet, and she may not change her weight consciously by eating or drinking. Now, I'll give you a sporting chance. You weigh a hundred and twenty-two pounds and fifteen ounces, or maybe a little less. You can weigh yourself and see. If you gain an ounce, or enough to make you weigh one twenty-three, within an hour, and without eating or drinking, or thinking about your body, I'll marry you and not even ask your name."

"There are certain absorptions—"

"Nope. That's out. You'd have to think about your body."

Lucy's smooth brow puckered. She stepped quickly to the desk and spun the globe resting there.

"Nope. No luck there. We're almost at sea level. You can't get any lower than that. And if you went to higher altitude you'd weigh less."

Suddenly Lucy smiled, snatched up a pencil and began figuring on a pad, and Cornith mused reflectively: "She's a good sport. And a beauty. By George! I hope she figures it out." Then he frowned.

"But it's impossible."

Lucy dropped the pencil and clapped her hands. "I have it," she exclaimed. "Time me now."

"I'll have to weigh you first," Cornith said. "Dripping wet."

Lucy's cheeks became a shade pinker. "Won't you take my word for it?"

Cornith shook his head. "You're an accomplished liar."

"I'll weigh her," the blonde offered.

Cornith shrugged. "It's okay with me. But when you claim you weigh a hundred and twenty-three pounds, with no ounces lacking, I'm going to do the weighing."

Lucy's cheeks took on a rosy shade. Apparently preoccupied with her own thoughts, she made no reply. She followed the blonde girl out of the room and Cornith sat on the edge of the desk to wait. He wished now that he had not posed the problem. He could think of a thousand reasons why it would be interesting to be married to such an intensely alive creature. And he wasn't deceived about what were termed her bad qualities. They were the result of a training pattern. They were not her basic personality and they were not deeply ingrained. In fact, she could be, and was, everything he wanted in a woman. He had made up his mind to ask her to marry him even if she failed to solve the problem, when she and the blonde returned.

THERE were faint beads of moisture on the lobes of Lucy's ears, and the rose-colored dress hung awry. "Didn't have time to dry thoroughly, and had to jump into my clothes. Hurry! We're going to be married. Right now!"

"How much do you weigh?"

"One twenty-two, fourteen and three-quarter ounces. But I'll weigh one twenty-three within twenty minutes."

Cornith shook his head. "Stubborn," he told himself. "Bluffing. Lying. I ought to teach her a lesson."

"I'm going to put a clause in the ceremony," he said aloud, "that if you don't weigh exactly a hundred and twenty-three pounds, we're not legally married."

"You're so clever," she smiled. "I was going to do that myself."

"Game, anyway," Cornith mused, as he followed her hurriedly out to the chute and up to the roof.

"We'll get married and then you can weigh me," she said. "And if I don't weigh one twenty-three—" Her brow puckered. "Gee! I hope I've got it figured right."

"If you don't weigh a hundred and twenty-three, it won't be legal," Cornith insisted. "I'm going to put in that clause."

A look of pain showed in her features for an instant, then it was gone and she led the way to a sky-taxi.

"There's a hurry-up marrying

place ten minutes away," she said. "Same altitude. Near sea level. We can get married in a hurry there."

Cornith shrugged. "Tell the driver."

Thirty minutes later they were married, with the cancelling clause included. Cornith thought now that he had carried the joke too far. Lucy seemed on the verge of tears. Besides, they would not be legally and finally married until after he had weighed her. And he knew now that she meant to abide strictly by the words of the ceremony, that if the scales showed less than a hundred and twenty-three pounds she would not consider herself married. He thought of finagling the scales. But she went along with him to buy them, and insisted that they be checked and sealed to the hundredth of an ounce. Cornith knew now that she was not only a liar, but the most sincere and conscientious person he had ever known.

HE felt cheap and mean and low as he accompanied her into the bridal suite he had engaged via pocket-communicator. He placed the scales on the floor and felt as though he had deliberately cheated and tricked an innocent child. He could see that Lucy was uncertain of herself. He could feel the tremors of fear that shook her, the doubts, the questions of right and wrong, the wondering what all this

was going to do to her happiness. He would have traded his hunting lodge on Mars just for the privilege of going back and changing it all and telling her that she was perfect at a hundred and twenty-two pounds, fifteen ounces, and need never change an iota to please him.

She turned slowly to face him, and two crystal tears formed in the corners of her azure eyes. "Just one kiss," she begged. "Because I might fail, and that means the end."

Cornith held her close. He wished there was something he could do to comfort her, to change it all, but he knew the depth of her sincerity, and he knew that she would offer no excuse, would accept no failure even from herself. Indeed, her whole happiness, it seemed, depended upon her promise that she would fill the specifications even to that final ounce.

She pushed him away and smiled through her tears. "I'm losing weight by crying," she said. "Gee, golly! I hope I've figured it right."

"Dripping wet," he said. "Leave the suds on if you wish."

She shook her head. "That wouldn't be honest." She broke away, ran to the bathroom. She stepped inside the bathroom and drew the door shut. Cornith stood there alone, and suddenly he felt as though his own weight had increased. Something was gone, locked away from him, something that had

been vitally alive and warm and colorful. He walked over to the window and stood looking down at the street below. It was filled with life, but its life seemed alien, remote. His ears picked up the faint sound of the shower, and he knew that his thoughts would always hereafter be filled with the memory of how close he had come to happiness.

He heard the bathroom door open softly, but he didn't dare look. His heart was too heavy. Then he heard the soft, tremulous voice. "I've got soap in my eyes. Come look at the scales. Don't look at me. I'm dripping wet."

Cornith turned slowly, caught his breath. The vision that met his eyes was a loveliness transcending his wildest dreams. The coruscating beads of water were like flashing jewels adorning a soft pink and white body, vitally alive and yet trembling in fear. He stepped quickly to the scales and looked.

A warm glow started at his feet and rushed upward, making him giddy as it swept over his neck and face and on into his brain. The scales showed a hundred and twenty-three pounds and four one-hundredths of an ounce. He glanced up. She had wiped the soap out of her eyes and those azure orbs were flashing a surge of joy unparalleled.

Cornith sprang to take her in his arms, but she leaped away, raced

to the bathroom, slammed the door and locked it.

"Come on out," he said. "You saw the scales."

"I'm not coming out," she called back, "until you figure out how I did it."

"Don't be silly."

"I'm a determined woman, Herb darling!"

And Cornith knew that it was true. There was nothing left but to get to work and figure out how she had accomplished the seeming miracle. He drew out a chair at the writing desk, found paper and felt for his pen. He stated the problem, cancelling out eating and drinking, for he had been with her all of the time and she had not taken anything. He thought that perhaps she and the blonde had lied about her original weight. But that didn't fit. She had been sincerely worried about whether she would succeed. Ah! There it was.

He went to work and in three minutes he had two pages filled with figures, ciphers and symbols. He smiled grimly to himself and worked on. Ten minutes passed. He heard her call from the bathroom, but did not answer. He was engrossed with the problem. He worked on and on, eliminating variables, restating the problem, beginning anew with a different theory, working on and on. An hour passed.

With the desk and floor littered, Cornith paused reflectively. He

heard a soft movement behind him, then Lucy's voice said, "I couldn't wait any longer. I've come to help you."

"Don't bother me now," Cornith said. He jotted down another row of numerals, then leaned back and sighed.

Two warm arms went around his neck. "Was it so difficult?" she asked. "I figured it out in no time. It's just that gravity differs at the poles and the equator. It is slightly more at the poles. About one in fifty, I think. I didn't know for certain. But on that basis I figured there would be a change in specific gravity of about an ounce every hundred miles or so. I had to guess at it. That's why I was so frightened. Anyway, we flew over two hundred miles north to this hurry-up place. Do you understand it, darling?"

"You mean, about your weight and the difference in gravity between the equator and the poles?"

"Yes, darling."

"I figured that out in the first three seconds after I sat down. I've been computing your basic personality, trying to figure out how long you would remain in the bathroom before coming out to help me. I missed it somewhere. I figured you'd be in there another two hours. I'll have to check my figures. Go away."

"Oh, no, you won't recheck them." She placed a hand over the paper. "On this one I'm going to help. The error is right there. You didn't allow enough for the volume and strength of my love to cancel out the volume and strength of my determination and resistance. Square resistance and raise love to the power of ten. And now if you don't give me a big kiss, I'll revert to the specifications and steal one."

In the next instant she was crushed in his strong arms. And her ears were wiggling ecstatically.

The Mad Butcher

HOW often have you read a tale of horror, or heard, a fantastic story whose background was grim and eerie, and which left you with icy fingers plucking at your spine? All lovers of fantasy have felt this thrill and often it is one of the major reasons fantasy, especially of the outre type, is so popular.

Almost twenty years ago there occurred in fact—though it reads like fantasy (and may have an un-

earthly element in it a la Charles Fort)—a series of hideous crimes on the outskirts of a major city. "Mad fiend," trite as it is, is the only phrase to describe this weird monster, who, despite the efforts of hundreds of policemen, murdered by decapitation, a dozen friendless derelicts. Apparently an insane doctor or perhaps a butcher, this incredible monster struck at night near the banks of a small river running through a hobo jungle. He was never

seen nor was any suspect connected with the crimes. After the death-
orgy, the monster vanished as mysteriously as he had come. No more murders were committed.

All efforts to track down the killer were fruitless. It was as if he'd never been—and there were those who said he hadn't—that he'd been from another plane—and no one can gainsay them.

Then a short while ago, the musty, dust-covered files of the case were re-opened to another entry. The monster—if he was the same—had struck again, in the same manner and in the same area. Whether this portends another orgy like the last only time will tell.

The senseless, aimless, perverse

methods of the criminal make the incident appear as if it had never been planned by a human mind. Its stealthy success makes it seem as if some fiendish devil were jerking the strings on a clay puppet. Rationality and reasonableness go out the window before the awfulness of it.

Fantasies have been written suggesting that there are *things* outside, beyond our ken, whose purpose is to toy with us and torture us to madness. "The Mad Butcher's" work seems exactly like this. Perhaps our sense of values requires re-examination. Maybe the world is not what we think it is. Maybe there are "ghosties and ghoulies and long-legged beasties an' things that go boomp i' the night . . ."

Memory Over Mind

THERE is a strong belief that it is possible to eliminate painful or unpleasant memories from the mind by either suppression or hypnosis. This idea has persisted right in modern times in spite of psychologists' efforts to show otherwise. An unpleasant incident may be temporarily relegated to the subconscious part of the mind, but as conventional psychiatry and the new Dianetics have shown, the incident may be recovered. Hypnotism may also be used for this purpose.

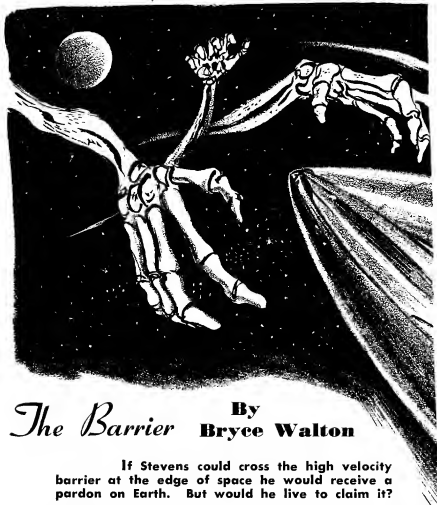
The mind doesn't relegate such things to the subconscious permanently and the thoughts when once recalled do no harm in themselves. Actually it is the emotional overtones and connotations associated with the memory that gives rise to the unpleasantness.

The method of demonstrating this is almost as old as psychology. Pav-

lov's famous experiments with dogs in which he induced automatic responses to given stimuli, show this more clearly than anything.

Recently a great many experiments have been conducted attempting to understand the nature of the "memory mechanism" and a lot of analogies have been drawn, comparing it with the recorder in a computing machine for instance. These ideas are fine, of course, within their limits. But no one has shown memory to be anything more than an inherent quality of a human mind dependent on nothing more than one's ancestors and one's state of health. Concentration, memory tricks and so on, may "strengthen" a memory for a slight given fact or series of facts, but generally speaking, either you have it or you don't—there ain't no ifs or buts about it!

* * *



The Barrier **By Bryce Walton**

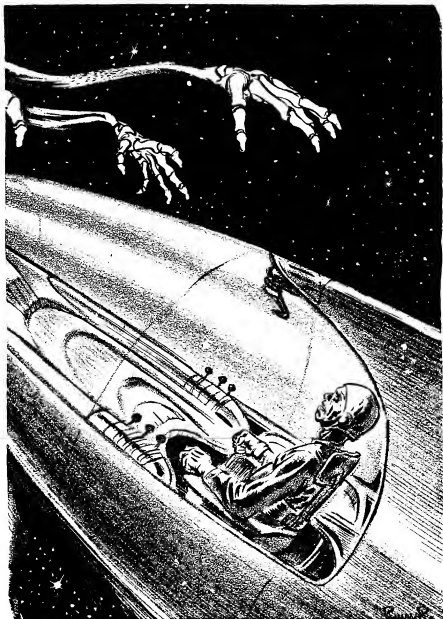
If Stevens could cross the high velocity barrier at the edge of space he would receive a pardon on Earth. But would he live to claim it?

THERE were maybe ten or fifteen people to see him off. They weren't cheering. They stood in the gray curtain of rain, hunched over with their hands in their storm-coat pockets. Behind them was the vague bulk of the

Experimental Station. And beyond that, invisible in the night, were the mountains he would never see again.

"O.K., Stevens. This is it."

So what? Stevens clanked as he turned toward the "Coffin." He was



His features were twisted by the acceleration, and his sanity seemed to have gone

encased in a bulging metal pressure suit and his head was a big alloy bubble. No one smiled. No one raised a hand to say goodbye.

Doris would, of course, say goodbye, if she were here. She wasn't here. She didn't even know about his volunteering.

Major Kanin nodded stiffly. His gray eyes wrinkled. "Good luck, Stevens," he said dutifully. It was meaningless. Kanin had sent too many poor guys out on a one-way trip. He knew Stevens wouldn't come down. Not in any recognizable form.

A couple of gray-suited mechanics moved around behind Stevens. Stevens leaned over and thrust his head into the tubular opening of the torpedo-like plane. The two mechanics lifted his legs, shoved him in headfirst like he was ammunition being crammed into an ancient cannon. The metal hatch slid down past his feet. He was bound tightly by the cockpit which was only an air-conditioned tube but slightly larger than his body. When the canopy over his head closed, he had only two inches between the plate in his helmet and the control and instrument panel.

For one agonizing moment, long and terrifying, Stevens felt an awful compressing suffocation and entrapment. The claustrophobia went away, in part, and left the plexglas plate in his helmet dewed with his sweat.

He tried to relax. He stared at the controls. He twisted his head carefully then so as not to bump his helmet against the side—the noise was numbing inside when he did bump anything — and looked through the tiny peep-hole in the tubular wall which would soon close too, leaving him completely sealed. He looked out and waited for the signal. Major Kanin had turned his back and was discussing something with a Doctor and a Lieutenant. The mechanics were around preparing the kick-off rockets.

The "Coffin" was light, and it was new. A slight improvement over the last one. But the so-called improvement was a farce, Stevens knew, because no one had any idea why none of the others had ever come back. None of them expected him to come back either, and they showed it plainly. Also, none of them cared particularly, from any human point of view. The Military cared of course, from another viewpoint.

This was another velocity test run. Once around the Earth to this take-off spot on the desert. The Military wanted to get to the Moon if they had to walk there over a suspension bridge of human dead. The first Sovereign State to get a military base on the Moon would, in theory, be the all-time victor in what certain kinds of humorists called the "game" of war. So far, no one had been able to stand the

velocity.

Stevens felt his skin stretch in a dry, tight grin. He carefully and slowly moistened his lips and watched the light that would blink yellow. A minute after that the job would kick-off before rockets delivering a 3000-pound thrust for twelve seconds.

STEVENS guessed that the brain-boys up in some hidden bureau had an idea that sooner or later they would find somebody who could stand it, then they could make tests, find out why. Stevens had no idea how many had already been sacrificed. The boys upstairs knew but they weren't giving out statistics these days. Stevens would increase the unknown number by one more.

So it meant nothing, he thought. He wasn't one of the superboys, the jet-jyrenes, the hero lads who never came back and had statues and plaques stuck all over the place for being permanently en absentia. Not anymore, he wasn't.

He was one of the new volunteers from the West Coast branch of the Military Prison. Big-hearted Kanin had even promised him a pardon if he brought the ship back. It was a new high in irony, but that was about all.

He wouldn't come back, and he knew it. But he would be free, and Doris would be free to live her own life. He had been stupid, hot-head-

ed, once—and this was a preferable way, he had decided, to pay up the debt.

Doris had resigned herself to waiting for him. It was a manslaughter charge, and he would have gotten out maybe in fifteen years. They didn't parole anybody from a Military Prison, at least not on anything as heavy as manslaughter. It wasn't fair to Doris, nor to himself.

All right. He was in a shiny "Coffin" and he would soon be on his way to wherever the others had gone—into nowhere. Where was nowhere? That was a question. It was way up, higher than anyone had returned from to answer—still within the bounds of gravity but—*high*. A lot of guys had found it, but they weren't sending back any ESP messages from the Beyond.

It was up there where the Earth lost its face behind thick vapor veils and began to look like a fancy balloon, that was where you found out the location of nowhere. Inside a beautifully stream-lined "Coffin" you found out—hurtling way beyond the speed of sound, shattering the supersonic barriers, and faster and faster still . . .

What happened to them? Nobody had figured it out. All the best brains in the world working on it might figure it out. But the brains were split up, divided into little camps here and there, getting a lot of atomic spitballs ready to throw

at one another, when teacher's back was turned.

So it wasn't figured out, what happened to them. They had come a long way since they first broke the barrier. Faster and faster and faster—but they'd hit a limit somewhere up there. And until they wiped out that limitation, the Moon was as far away as it had ever been back when man thought the canoe was a great discovery.

They just went faster and faster and faster—and then they disappeared. A curtain parted. A curtain closed. And wherever man wanted to get to so fast—he got there.

The yellow light blinked at Stevens like a jaundiced eye. Stevens winked back with a mock gesture that was hardly genuine. The world rocked, and his head seemed to drain suddenly as though by a suction pump.

HIS task was simple enough. The controls were automatic until the signal came for bringing the ship in, and then manual controls would be used. Until then, he served as only a slightly necessary human element. A voice. There was the radio, and his voice. He was to keep them informed down there. Keep talking right up to the point when whatever happened — happened.

Stevens talked. He reported the altitude, the velocity, the temperature. He kept reporting as the three

of them increased. His eyes watched the light that might blink red. The "panic-light." When that blinked, it meant curtains. It meant fire in the "Coffin." It meant that if you were in a position to do it, you could use the automatic pilot ejector and get hurled into the screaming currents by a 37 mm cartridge that shot the pilot and cockpit straight up at 60 ft. per second.

At this altitude and this velocity, the ejector was useless.

He whispered, "Velocity — five thousand—" He spoke again. "Velocity—fifteen thousand—"

It was frightening. He flicked on the observation screen. It was a blur. He couldn't feel anything. He couldn't hear anything. If he could only lift his legs, bend his knees. If he could only turn over on his side—

He opened his mouth to scream, and somehow prevented the burst that frothed to soundless bubbles on his lips. His body seemed to swell, seeking to burst the Coffin's walls like a swelling mummy. The terror remained in him, icy and deep.

He watched the gauges creeping up and up. He was speaking. He knew he was reporting but he couldn't hear himself saying anything. He watched the "panic-light" that would glow red and that would be curtain time. There was no sound. No sound at all. There was no vision. No awareness of motion. At this incredible height, at this fright-

ening velocity, there was no awareness of anything at all.

He was in a Coffin all right, and he was buried — as certainly as though he were six feet under and as stationary as only the dead can be when they are buried and forgotten down under the clean Earth where they belong when they're tired.

They didn't belong up here, not this way.

"The cooling system's clogging," he heard himself whisper. "Crystals of ice . . . cockpit's like a miniature snow storm . . ."

He heard the unemotional voice come clearly to him. "The emergency trigger—"

He used it. He felt a freezing grin rip across his face as he reached out and used it. The icy spray died away and he heard himself saying something else.

"It's the velocity. I don't have any reason for saying it—I just feel it—you could feel it up here too—I can't explain it, but it's the velocity. I know it. Maybe they crashed on the Earth somewhere. There's lots of places on Earth a ship could crash and no one would know it, especially when it would be taken for a meteor. But this feels like it's the velocity that does it up here. Listen, what about this? Anyone thought of this—what if the velocity breaks a man through into another dimension?"

No one commented on that. It

happened to him right then, and he felt it coming. Reflexes tried to move his body, and his head and feet drummed on the restricting tubular walls. There was a wrenching blur and a slipping spinning vertigo.

* *

. . . there was darkness and he floated in it, but he was conscious. It wasn't any familiar kind of consciousness. Lights began glimmering here and there like fireflies. But it was no dream, he knew that. He didn't know what it was. The music that was something far and incomprehensively- beyond music sounded, and he seemed to float on a broad tape of sound to float on a road, a path, a curvature that broadened into unlimited vistas.

It was brief. It was like peeking through a tiny hole and seeing something beautiful, unworldly, very nearly incomprehensible, drift by. He heard a voice that had no body, but he knew it was real. very real. More real than anything he had called real before.

"Another is coming through. Check the matrix."

HE tried to understand. Vaporous curtains seemed to draw back one by one and a kind of clarity flowed over his mind like cool ocean up a white beach. A first faint tingling thrill moved in his blood, and became pleasure that mounted through ecstasy and then became

something else for which he had no name.

He had called it—nowhere. This wasn't anything like that. This was really *somewhere*. Soft lights bathed him like water. Shadows seemed to shift and sway and there was silver in the light, dusted with golden motes.

He thought desperately. "Where is this? What has happened?"

"This is Death," the voice that had no face or form answered. "That is what you term it, in the lower stage reality from which you have come. There are other ways of going through the barrier, but death is the sure and the ordinary one. Many come through, in many ways—"

Stevens tried to understand, and he knew that he could not. He tried to see his present form, his present meaning. There was nothing tangible. He drifted. He was light and sound perhaps, movement perhaps. He was part of something greater and far more complex than his undeveloped powers of perception could absorb.

Stevens thought. "You mean — I'm — Dead. I mean — that I'm not living now?"

The thought answered him. It wasn't a sequence of words, phrases, forming meaning. The entire answer was a part of him, immediately. "You call it death. Actually you are more alive, you have come through the barrier into what you

call the fourth dimension. It is really but a broader awareness of a higher reality—"

It didn't mean much to Stevens. The unknown, the intangible — it sent a chill through his consciousness. Pain hit him. He winced. Light roiled, irritation eddied like muddy streaks in a clear stream. A bluish haze spread like staining ink through the clouds of brilliance. Dark cracks spread like lines through colored glass.

Stevens felt an icy wind. He seemed to swirl inchoate through a forest of wildly irritated leaves and branches.

The thought came to him, weakly, through distance that was more than mere distance, through barriers of space and realms of time. It came to him weakly, and it began to fade.

"Everything that was, that is, or will be, we are conscious of here in this higher stage of reality. All must come through, and there is never again contact with the lower stage, the third dimension of perception. The matrix is universal, eternal, and it is set and unchanging."

Stevens' mind screamed. "But I'm returning—help me, I don't want to go back. I want to stay, to stay—"

"You are John Stevens—" the voice, the thought, drifted to him from what seemed infinite spaces.

"Yes, yes—"

"There is a distortion, you do not understand. Someday you will. You are premature. The pattern is rigid, and everything has its set moment of alteration. This distortion. I cannot explain. We are not perfect here. There is yet a higher reality, and a higher one still, and the stages are infinite. But you will be back, John Stevens. Soon. Very soon."

"When—when?"

A column of sound arose and shattered in glittering spray. "The matrix has the answer. John Stevens—no this is not your time. You call it a week. Seven days. Such terms are meaningless here. To us, it is happening now. We can see it happening. We can see you coming through the barrier — to stay—to learn—to live as we live—"

"When?" he screamed at the fading thought.

"Soon. A week. Seven days. It is here. The Matrix has the answer : . . ."

"Now. Let me stay," Stevens screamed. "I don't want to go back."

"You are not really here, or you could not go back. This is a glimpse. Many have had it. Someday you will understand. But in seven days—"

THE radio voice was shrill. "Can you hear? Can you hear? There has been five seconds of unexplainable static! Can you hear?"

"Sure, I can hear," he said hoarsely. He blinked, stared at the blurred instruments against his eyes. Suddenly he shouted. "I'm still alive, you get that? I've passed the velocity apex, and I'm still alive!"

He heard Major Kanin's voice. Some of the fatuousness was lost in the emotion of triumph. "Great! Great, you've done it! Now you've got to bring her in! That pardon—"

All right. He would do that. He had been a super-boy, a jet-gyrene himself, once. A big-shot, a wonder boy jet-hero, before he got that jealous quirk that had turned out to be baseless. A feud that had gone on for years and culminated in a fight, and Bill Carson had died from concussion. There had been nothing between Doris and Carson, but it was too late to think about that now.

The Military had been harsh, and he'd known he couldn't bear the confinement. And he hadn't wanted Doris to suffer for his psychological blowup either. He had volunteered for what should have been suicide — but he still lived. He couldn't understand that. He should be Dead. He knew that. But he wasn't, and he knew he would bring her in. A pardon—

The world was small for Stevens. A coffin, a cannon-barrel. And he was stuffed in it. His hands alone could move over the simple controls, and his eyes could move over

the gauges. A jet-pilot had to learn a special feel to bring in a jet-ship. And Stevens had learned that "feel" rapidly, years ago. It seemed a long time ago when he had taken that harsh training: a few hours in a conventional flyer, a few more in a Mustang 60. Then that rending day when he had "checked out" in a jet-trainer.

Stevens' eyes bulged in sudden terror. Sweat blurred his vision: The red light was glowing. The *Panic Light*. It meant bad trouble at this speed. Fire—

"But I'll bring it in," he whispered. Smoke curled through the Coffin. The heat expanded around him rapidly. He thought of the ejector, but he was too low now, coming in. He tried to scream. The crackling wavering heat inside his helmet was intolerable. The controls were jammed. His hands fell away and he dropped his head helplessly and the world exploded . . .

THIS time there was a crowd, and they acted differently. They were enthusiastic. There were doctors and nurses. Their faces were twisted with admiration. Stronger than the admiration was a fearful kind of disbelief. The Doctor touched his lips with his tongue and coughed uneasily as he stared at Stevens.

Major Kanin was beaming. "Man," his voice boomed through

the hospital room. "Man! You're alive. No one knows how you can be alive, but you are! We've licked it. It's a miracle!"

Voices agreed with that in a chorus of incredulous whispers. Miracle . . .

The Major said. "I've already got that pardon coming through, Stevens. It'll be probational of course, but that will all be forgotten now, Stevens. You're something special."

The doctors and nurses stared at him with unbelieving eyes.

"You've been examined thoroughly, Stevens, and you're all right, not a scratch! It's impossible, but it's true. Every doctor here, every mechanic, says it's impossible. Your ship's just a pile of melting metal, Stevens, but you crawled out of it absolutely uninjured. Nobody understands it, but everybody's glad!"

The Doctor whispered. "Miracles like this sometimes happen, but no one can explain them. His body should be torn to pieces, burned. Well, he certainly had to have had some unique physical quality to have gotten through the high velocity peak."

"Yes, you hear that, Stevens?" the Major boomed.

Stevens was staring at the ceiling. He was trying to think, to remember.

"Now listen to this, Stevens. You went up a convict, and now you're a hero. You're in perfect physical

condition, so we're going right ahead with Project Ultimo. And you'll handle the rocket, Stevens! If anyone can get to the Moon, you can, from this exhibition today!"

"What's that," Stevens said. He looked at their faces.

"It'll take a week to get the rocket ready," the Major said. "It's the Moon now, Stevens! The Moon!"

"The Moon," Stevens repeated.

"This will be no secret, Stevens!" Major Kanin stood up, his chest out, his heavy-jowled face glowing with triumph. "The world will know about it when you take off, this time. This won't be secret. The Enemy will know then that they've

lost! Lost, utterly and unquestionably. With military bases on the Moon, they'll be helpless and they'll know it when you make that successful flight! One week, Stevens!"

Stevens looked out the window at the gray curtain of rain. "What was that? One week—" Something stirred in his memory. He grappled for it, lost it. He closed his eyes.

"Seven days, Stevens, that's all!"

He didn't answer. For an instant, behind the bottomless darkness of his closed lids, he saw something—something intangible and shimmering, beyond the grayness and rain. And then it was gone.

THE END

Ring Around The World

BACK in the early days of radio and electronics, a number of experiments were made in which low frequency high-powered radio transmitters sent out definite signals. Receiving apparatus near these transmitters would pick up the signal—followed by another pick-up about one-tenth of a second later. At first this was puzzling until engineers realized that the second signal was the same as the first but *it had gone once around the world!*

Recently the experiment has been duplicated in order to cast more light on the peculiar property of radio waves—their reflection between the surface of the Earth and the ionosphere. The Bureau of Standards, using a very low-frequency transmitter (around eighteen kilocycles) and a terrific amount of

power (about three hundred and fifty kilowatts) succeeded in sending a series of duplicable signals around the circumference of the Earth in a matter of about a tenth of a second. The radio wave does not travel straight around the Earth. It bounces between sky and earth as often as fifty or fifty-five times! This amounts to jumps of around four hundred and fifty miles each!

Nowadays world communication uses considerably higher frequencies but there is a desire to learn more about low frequency work for the simple reason that it may eventually prove useful in inter-space ship or inter-planetary work. This is pure hypothesis of course, but in free space low frequency radio waves may show great potentialities.

* * *

THE VENGEANCE OF TOFFEE

THE bombs ticked—in remote places — behind locked and guarded doors. The bombs ticked, and the terrible sound was distinct in the farthest corners of the world—wherever a man picked up a newspaper, turned on a radio—or paused to listen to the beating of his own heart. A Bomb . . . H Bomb . . . X Bomb—the bombs ticked louder and louder with the growing hours — and each man dwelt alone now with the dark spectre of his own trembling fear.

"Yesterday we perfected a new kind of totalitarian death . . ." (It was difficult to remember the pleasant, relaxed voice which had once given the announcer his popularity, for now it seemed that his breath passed over taut nerves rather than vocal cords. But no one noticed; it was only what he said that mattered now, not how he said it. Fear fed on fear with an avid, indiscriminate appetite—and flourished from the diet.)

"Today we can only be certain that the foreign powers will have caught up with us within the next few hours."



As Toffee aimed the magic ring, You-Know-Who suddenly sprawled across the desk with a howl of pained surprise!

By Charles F. Myers

The world was on the brink of atomic war and nothing, it seemed, could prevent it. But Toffee had a plan—and a little magic to boot!

Illustrated by Joe W. Tillotson



"Can you remember the Atomic Age, ladies and gentlemen? How long ago that was! And yet how swiftly we have progressed from that to the Age of Human Terror.

"The X Bomb—the incomprehensible unit of power and destruction which dwarfs the human soul and reduces it to a negligible fraction of quivering fright—just one small fraction contributing to the monstrous organism of terror which has lately become our modern civilization. How wretched we are to be living in a civilization in which the word 'city' has been rendered obsolete by the word 'target.' The New York Target . . . the Chicago Target . . . the Salt Lake and San Francisco Targets. How wretched we are.

"And is it strange that these targets which were once cities are being deserted? Is it strange that men have begun to run from the bombs even before they have begun to fall? That is the nature of terror.

"For the first time in its history the nation looks upon a nomadic society—largely that group of the working people who have ceased working to wander aimlessly, seeking safety within our own borders—living by thievery and lawlessness. Crime has increased so rapidly of late that a comparative estimate is impossible. That, too, is the nature of terror.

"Today the government would

force these erstwhile workers back to the hearts of the targets—force them by law back to the factories to engage again in the production of death and destruction.

"'Necessary,' the statesmen say. 'Necessary to national safety.' But with the statesmen's words comes the obvious question: Is there still any national safety left for any nation? Does it exist anywhere, to be preserved? Haven't the fleeing nomads asked themselves this question already, turning their frightened eyes to the unprotecting skies?

"But the statesman must speak—and he must speak logic, even now when logic has deserted us, and words can no longer save us. Every man — statesman or otherwise — knows that it is no longer a question of whether the bombs will drop—but when they will drop—and who will drop them—we or they?

"It is true that no nation has declared war, but terror declares its own war. Can we wait another day to take the initiative? Can they? The undeclared enemy may destroy us tomorrow—or tonight — even within the next few minutes. I may not live to finish this broadcast—and you may not live to hear it . . ."

SUDDENLY there was a sharp click, and the voice stopped, silenced as effectively as though a wire had been knotted about the speaker's throat. Marc Pillsworth, startled at the sudden silence, snap-

ped forward in his chair and looked up. Julie, the lamp light slanting sharply across her face, glared down at him with tense irritation. She removed her hand significantly from the radio switch.

"I'm telling you, Marcus Pillsworth," she said menacingly, "I can't stand any more of it. If you turn on that bloody instrument again—if you so much as twitch your bony finger in its direction—one of us is going to die of unnatural causes, and you may have read that the female is notoriously more long-lived than the male."

Marc stared at her incredulously through the chill dimness of the living room. Then he sighed heavily. This also was the nature of human terror; every man was married to a shrew these days. Women simply weren't up to it.

But Julie had been better than most—until now. He looked at the tightly drawn lips, the circled eyes and tried to remember his wife's cool blonde beauty as it had been only a month ago. The contrast was disquieting. Well, these were harrowing times for her.

But they were just as harrowing for everyone else—for him. She ought to realize that. Suddenly, unaccountably, Marc felt his self-control slipping away from him with all the sleazy inevitability of a pair of silk shorts with rotten elastic. Suddenly the distorted face across the room was not at all the face of

his wife, but the face of a vindictive stranger who had invaded his rights and his privacy with definite malice in mind. Reason left him, and, with a black sucking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he felt the last measure of his reserve trickle down the drain. Gripping the arms of his chair, he jutted his face out into the light and deliberately leered.

"With the world coming down around our ears," he snarled, "I suppose you expect me to sit here complacently simpering and snickering and snapping my gum like an addled adolescent? Don't you care that we may all go to blazes in the next few minutes?"

"No!" Julie screamed, fitting a direct answer to a direct question. "No, I don't care. I'm tired of caring. I'm tired through with caring. And I'm tired of you sitting there with those great elephantine ears of yours hinged to that radio. You've been at it day in, day out, day in, day out, day in . . . !"

"Stop repeating yourself like some idiot tropical bird," Marc snapped.

"Why don't you ever go down to the office any more?" Julie asked with womanly logic. "Why don't you get out of here and leave me alone?"

IN heavy martyrdom Marc lifted his eyes to the ceiling. What was the use? Why go through it all

again? He'd explained to her a million times that he no longer had any *reason* to go to the office. The advertising business had been one of the first to suffer. Who cared what the advertising industry had to say at a time like this? Who wanted to be beautiful or healthy or envied when there wasn't any future in it?

"Turn the radio on," he said steadily.

Julie's eyes actually sparked flame. "*What?* Do you really have the grassy green gall to ask me to turn that thing on again? I don't believe my ears!"

"I'm not asking," Marc said slowly, "I'm *instructing* you to."

"Hah!" Julie snorted to some invisible spectator. "Listen to him!" She eyed him nastily. "Ask me to shinny up the doorsill and do a swan dive into my cocktail. I'll do that sooner."

Marc met her gaze for a moment and momentarily declined the challenge. "I suppose you just want to sit here and never know what hit you?"

"Exactly," Julie said. "For heaven's sake what does it matter what hits us after we're dead? At least I don't want to sit here chewing my nails while some morbid-minded deficient drives me into a state of complete nervous collapse."

Marc disengaged himself from his chair. She had a point there, though he'd rot before he admitted

it. With considerable unconcern he moseyed across the room and glanced out the window. Then he stopped and leaned closer to the pane. Across the street the world was already ablaze. The night sky glowed red with flame.

"My God!" he cried. "The Fredericks are on fire!"

Julie moved to his side and stared out the window.

"Who are those people?" she asked. "The ones sitting on the lawn there?"

Marc directed his gaze to the right. He should have seen them sooner, except that one's sense of logic, when one is witnessing a fire, does not readily encompass a group of people lounging on blankets in the glowing radiance — especially when those people are concerned more with food, drink and cards than with the fire—and more especially when the owners of the flaming dwelling are prominent among those present . . .

"Aren't those the Fredericks?" Julie asked.

"Do you suppose they've noticed the house?" Marc asked. "But I suppose they must."

"Maybe not," Julie said. "They've been drunk for days. It started out as a house warming party. Do you suppose this is their idea of a joke?"

MARC turned away. "The papers are full of this sort of

thing. The anxiety has driven people mad." Then suddenly he stiffened. "Maybe they've heard something! Maybe they've decided to burn their home rather than let the enemy do it for them." He ran to the radio and snapped the switch.

"*Beside every man stalks the black shadow of doom . . . !*" the announcer groaned.

At the window Julie instantly snapped to a position of rigid erectness. With cold fury she turned and regarded Marc's lank figure bent attentively to the radio speaker. Her eyes rested on her husband's impassive posterior, and glittering, unbridled madness flickered in their depths.

"*When will the attack fall?*" the announcer inquired, and Julie answered him without hesitation. "Now, brother," she murmured. "Right now!"

Unaware of the declaration of hostilities from the rear, Marc hung on the words of the announcer: "*We can only brace ourselves and hope . . .*"

It was a pity he did not have the foresight—or perhaps hindsight—to follow the announcer's advice. In the next moment Julie's foot, propelled so as to accomplish the same work as an iron sledge, completed an arc that terminated in what might crudely be called a bull's eye.

With a scream of mortal agony, Marc started forward, and jutted

his head forthwith into the speaker of the radio. There was a dreadful splintering sound, and then with a squeal, not unlike Marc's, the announcer fell silent.

Marc was unaware of this latter development; both his soul and body were too consumed with throbbing pain to be concerned any longer with such trivialities as the X Bomb and the demise of the world. The world could go to hell in beach sandals and it would be as nothing to the awful thing which had befallen him. Thrusting his hands forcibly to the seat of his anguish, he dislodged his head from the radio and regarded Julie from a crouching position. Clutching himself in a most unmindful way he stared up at his mate with almost animal loathing.

"What a rotten thing to do!" he rasped. "And what a fiendish place to do it! You . . . you're . . . you're *inhuman!*"

Julie laughed evilly. "I warned you, you reptile! I told you I couldn't stand any more!"

MARC grimaced as a new wave of pain surged upward through his body. "I just hope you're proud, waiting until a man's got his back turned and then kicking him in the . . . !"

"There's no need to be crude about it," Julie cut in quickly.

"That's funny, that is!" Marc snapped, baring his teeth. "Me—

crude! What about you? I suppose you've been the perfect little lady in this affair? I'm not surprised you can't bear to face your crime!"

"Vulgar!" Julie yelled. "Vulgar, skinny man!"

Marc glanced at the radio. "You've ruined it!"

"You ruined it yourself. Though I will say that if you hadn't, I had every intention of taking a meat axe to it."

"And to me, too, I dare say. A nice way for a wife to go on to a husband who has cherished and protected her."

"Oh, stop it, you ninny," Julie said. "Stop carrying on as though I'd murdered you."

"I'd have preferred to be murdered," Marc said, shuddering with pain.

"Stop crouching like that," Julie said. "And stop holding yourself in that suggestive way. You look like a child with uncertain habits. Straighten up."

Marc considered the matter of straightening up; never had he felt so strongly the need to rise to his full height. He relinquished his grip on himself and tried to unbend. Instantly he fell back into the crouching position with a cry of pain.

"I can't!" he cried. "I can't straighten up!"

Julie's expression swiftly undertook a series of transformations ranging from suspicion to chagrin

to abject contrition.

"Of course you can," she said anxiously. "Try."

"I can't, I tell you!" Marc gritted. "And it serves you right. As a matter of fact I hope I stay this way, and you have to spend the rest of your days explaining to everyone how it happened. You've dislocated my sacroiliac. that's what you've done, you brutish female!"

"Oh, no!" Julie gasped. "Oh, Marc!" She ran toward him.

"Get away from me!" Marc snarled. "Don't you touch me, you Judith Iscariot!"

"Oh, dear!" Julie wailed. She held out a hand. "I'll get a doctor. the one down the block. Don't do anything. I'll be right back." She started toward the door.

"Tell him how it happened!" Marc called after her spitefully. "Tell him how you kicked your own husband in the . . ."

But the door slammed as Julie hurried out of the house and down the steps.

Marc returned his hands gingerly to his pulsing bottom and stared gloomily at the floor.

"Damn!" he said. "Damn, damn, damn!"

THE doctor strapped a final length of adhesive across Marc's back and helped him into a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

"It may be tender for a day or two," he said. He helped Marc into

his pajama coat. "You'll be all right, though. You can have Mrs. Pillsworth take that tape off for you at the end of the week."

"I'll wear it to my grave," Marc snapped, "before I'll permit that woman to touch me again."

"Now, now, Mr. Pillsworth," the doctor temporized. "You'll feel better in the morning." He turned and picked up his case. "I imagine those sedatives will take care of everything for tonight."

"Thank you, doctor," Marc said gratefully, and sank back rigidly on the bed. Lying down, held stiffly by the tape, he was forced to watch the doctor from the corner of his eye.

"Goodnight, doctor."

"Goodnight." The doctor nodded from across the room and opened the door to leave. Julie was revealed wringing her hands in the hallway. She stepped forward.

"How is he, doctor?" she asked. "May I see him now?"

"Keep her out!" Marc growled from his pillow. "If she so much as sticks a hand in here I'll bite it!"

The doctor took Julie's arm. "Don't worry," he said. "Everyone's a little neurotic these days." He guided her back into the hall and closed the door.

Marc shifted his gaze from the door to the ceiling. The laughter of the Fredericks and their guests drifted in through the open window, and he reflected on its quality:

it was the laughter of desperation, not abandoned. Then the scream of a fire siren sounded faintly in the distance, and a woman echoed the cry weirdly from somewhere down the block—another patient for the good doctor.

Marc closed his eyes and waited for the sedatives to work. An echo of pain throbbed along his spine. He tried to shift a bit, but the tape held him in place, and the pain was only worse for the effort. He looked at the ceiling again and noted its singular blankness without pleasure. Finally he decided to turn his mind to other things—to the past and happier circumstances. Instantly, without any conscious cooperation, Toffee's pert face stirred in his memory. The ghost of a smile played at the corners of his mouth.

Not that the thought of Toffee was undilutedly pleasant. The gamine creature of his mind had a strong predisposition for trouble as well as pleasure—a sort of special magnetism that drew calamity to herself as well as the hapless souls around her. And yet the basic feeling, when thinking of Toffee, was one of distinct cheer. If trouble came to her it was never altogether unmixed with a certain element of hilarity. There was always a dash of excitement at least.

NATURALLY Toffee had not been in Marc's mind at all these last few months. For one thing

he had been much too concerned with the perilous state of the world, and Toffee, not a consistent inhabitant of this world, or much of any other, was difficult to picture in conjunction with truly worldly matters.

If it could be said that Toffee lived at all, it would have to be the Valley of Marc's mind. Not that she wasn't quite real; it was just that she did not exist materially unless she was projected into the material world through Marc's imagination. After that she was as flesh and blood as anyone—indeed, to an almost overwhelming degree at times.

If Marc had grown used to this strange circumstance—that his mind could actually create a living, breathing perfect hellion of a redhead—it was only by virtue of repetition. The human mind can adjust to the wildest of impossibilities in time, if it is only subjected to them often enough.

The smile grew on Marc's lips as he considered the provocative form and features of Toffee. It was a vision to prod the sternest lips into a smile.

Then the smile vanished as Julie's footsteps sounded outside in the hallway. Marc listened to their approach, turning his eyes toward the door.

He could almost see her standing there in the hallway beyond the closed door. Desolated with remorse,

she would be, undecided. A trickle of compassion gullied the surface of Marc's resentment. After all, she had really meant to hurt him. He would have called out to her, but the footsteps sounded anew and retreated down the hall. A moment later a door opened and closed. Marc sighed; tomorrow would be time enough to make it up to her.

He closed his eyes as a slow drowsiness began to seep through his lean body—probably the sedatives going to work. His mind wandered aimlessly for a moment, then collided, quite forcibly, with a sudden realization; during the last hour—for the first time in weeks—his thoughts had turned away from the dismal state of the world and centered on himself. For a whole hour his interest had been entirely absorbed in a simple domestic crisis—a little thing like a fight over the radio!

Marc's mind spun with the thought. In the last few months things—the matters of men's lives—had somehow gotten themselves all turned around backwards. People had ceased to concern themselves with the really important things—fighting over a radio, for instance — and had turned to the childish business of blowing up the world.

Marc paused to sum up these thoughts. Somewhere they contained a very great and very simple truth, though they were all snarled up.

Somehow his dislocated sacroiliac and the troubles of the world were subtly related . . .

The drowsiness washed over his mind again, and the thought was carried away on the crest. He reached after them, but couldn't quite make it. There was but one last glimmer:

"What this world needs," Marc murmured, "is a good five ton kick in the . . ."

His eyes closed, and instantly his chest began to rise and fall with the deep, regular breathing of complete sleep.

A warm breeze dusted the edge of the curtain and set it rippling. Somewhere in the night, in the distance across the city, a siren wailed with inconsolable melancholy. A cat stalked the intersection, as silent and intense as his leopard-long shadow. In his narcotic slumbers Marc rolled a bit to one side and made a small whimpering sound as the adhesive pulled at his back. He lay back and was still.

But Marc had dismissed all conscious memory of his injury some time hence. In the same moment when he had fallen asleep he had left the room of the rippling curtain and unhappy echoes and had passed into the untroubled, all-black world of unconsciousness.

Now, however, he stirred again, and with that almost indiscernible movement, leaped from the darkness

into lighter regions; into the secret, all - things - are - possible world of his subconscious—into the world where dreams can become more real than reality itself. Marc paused on the brink of this world for one tremulous moment, then plunged forward . . .

Brilliant light shot up to meet him so that he had to close his eyes against the glare. Then, slowly, he opened them again. Much like the sensation of stepping onto cool lawn after having walked barefoot on scorching concrete; pain was swiftly followed by almost unbearable pleasure.

Before Marc's gaze a soft greenness stretched away from him into graceful rising slopes and cool shadowed hollows—artfully like a display of green velvet in a shop window. On the rise of the most distant knoll stretched a forest of strange trees which held at once a cathedral of stateliness and a feathery pliability. Weaving slightly with the breeze they were mindful of nothing so much as a handful of royal plumes stuck into the earth at the whim of a bemused child. The Valley of The Subconscious Mind . . .

Marc knew instantly where he was; he'd been there often enough before. He glanced around in search of some movement, some flash of animated color. But there was nothing. He started up the rise, stretching his long legs purposefully be-

fore him. Surely she would be there, probably among the trees.

But she was not. Nor was there any sign of her. Marc moved to the crest of the knoll where the trees were the thickest, but the far horizon proved to be obscured by a blue mist that swirled and disported itself in the way of something alive. He stood there for a long moment, turning slowly, watching anxiously for any sign, but there was none. Finally he sat down, braced his elbows on his knees and rested his chin in his hand. Disappointment welled inside him—and hurt too; always before she had been right there to meet him at the moment of his arrival.

HE stiffened with a sudden, dreadful thought: what if Toffee wasn't there at all? What if she had ceased to exist? Wasn't it possible since she was only a product of his imagination? He stood up and again scanned the horizon. He bent down to peer into the shifting frontiers of the mists.

And then it happened. It was low and mean and sharply reminiscent of a similar agony which had befallen him in another time and place that he couldn't rightly remember. Grabbing himself uninhibitedly he doubled forward and sat down heavily on the ground.

Then it was over as swiftly and surprisingly as it had begun. The air rippled with musical, feminine

laughter, somewhere behind him. Marc swung around.

Lovely as ever, her mist-textured tunic only served to cast a cool greenish tint on the flesh of the outrageously perfect body beneath it. As she moved from beneath the trees, her flaming hair fell loose about her shoulders, as free and wild as the spirit it adorned. Though her full red lips quivered with laughter, the real laughter was in the depths of her green eyes. She paused for a moment, then ran forward and sat down lightly at his side. She eyed him with mischievous amusement.

"You dilapidated old despot," she smiled. "It's about time you showed that simpering old face of yours around here again."

Marc, mindful of his recent discomfiture, returned her gaze with chilly suspicion. But if Toffee noticed she pretended not to. With a quick maneuver which was executed with the skill and precision obtainable only through long and diligent practice, she twined her arms about his neck and kissed him full upon the mouth. Marc received the kiss with unblinking aloofness. His gaze remained hostile even as she leaned back from him.

"You kicked me," he said injuredly.

Toffee's eyes widened with enormous innocence. "You've got it wrong. I kissed you, that's all."

"Kicked," Marc said stubbornly. "You kicked me."

"Where?"

"Never mind."

"I was yards away from you at the time," Toffee said. "You saw me, yourself."

MARC reflected. It was true; she hadn't even been in sight. Still, experience had taught him that she was capable of anything, perhaps even a long-distance boot in the bottom.

"Well, somebody did it," he said sullenly.

"I swear it wasn't me," Toffee said stoutly. "I swear it on the old bald head of my maternal grandfather."

"You haven't got a maternal grandfather," Marc said shortly. "Don't talk nonsense."

"If I had a maternal grandfather," Toffee amended smoothly, "and he had an old bald head, I would unhesitatingly swear on it."

"You would just as unhesitatingly lop it off with an axe, too," Marc said, "if it served your purpose."

"Who wouldn't?" Toffee said. "Who wants an old bald head around all the time? Even a maternal grandfather's?"

"You haven't got a grandfather," Marc reminded her sharply, "maternal or otherwise."

"Certainly, I have," Toffee said stoutly. "I just swore on his old bald head, didn't I? Or did I swear

at his old bald head? I wouldn't be surprised. He's always whining around about how maternal he is, and I know darned well he's never been a mother in his life. It's disgusting."

"Sometimes I wonder why I even listen to you," Marc said. "I only get dizzy."

"Well, it's no wonder I'm flighty with that nasty old man under foot all the time," Toffee said. "If you'd just speak to this maternal grandfather of mine and tell him to stop sticking his old bald head into everything . . ."

"Stop!" Marc cried. "If you go on any more about it I'll start foaming at the mouth!"

Toffee lay back on the grass and stretched her arms thoughtfully above her head.

"Anyway," she said. "I swear my foot has not so much as brushed the seat of your pants." But even as she said it a smile played fleetingly at the corners of her mouth.

Marc turned to her, prepared to the last inflection to inform her that he would trust her only a little less far than he could hurl a steam shovel with his bare teeth, but he did not speak. His gaze went to her left hand and remained there.

IN all the time he had known her Marc had never seen Toffee wear even a single piece of jewelry: it was taken for granted that her charms were sufficient unto them-

selves without any superficial ornamentation. One might be silly enough to apply gilt to a lily, but never to a gold piece. Therefore, he was surprised now to glance down and see quite a large ring on her finger.

And the ring itself was quite as remarkable as the fact of Toffee's wearing it. Marc had never seen anything like it before and was willing to bet a tidy sum that no one else had either.

The metal part of the ring was neither silver nor gold, yet faintly resembled both — with a strange translucent quality that seemed altogether unreal. It had been fashioned into a design that was both simple and beautiful. But it was really the stone which caught and held Marc's eye.

Such a stone was simply not possible! It resembled an emerald of the largest, rarest and most beautiful kind, and yet it was not an emerald. No mere emerald, no natural chemical fluke, could possibly have the life—the almost living vitality—of this stone. It gave off a light that met the eye with something like an electrical shock. But that wasn't all. It was the *feeling* you got just from looking at it—that the stone both absorbed from and contributed to the living atmosphere around it. The thing actually assumed a personality as you stared at it. Marc felt a shiver of apprehension.

"Where did you get that ring?" he asked.

"Oh, that," Toffee said negligently. "Just something I dreamed up out of my head—the way you dream me up."

"You mean . . . ?"

"Sure," Toffee nodded. "You aren't the only one around here who can do cerebral somersaults. After all, I'm right here at the source. As a matter of fact it was something you said that gave me the idea."

"What do you mean?" Marc asked. "What did I say?"

"Oh, I forget just how it went right now," Toffee said. "Besides there'll be lots of time for all this dull conversation later. Right now . . ."

"Are you trying to hold something back from me?" Marc asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," Toffee said. She pulled herself closer, brushed her lips playfully across his cheek. "Absolutely nothing." She slipped her arm around his neck.

THE next few seconds were characterized with quiet struggle as Marc disengaged himself from her determined embrace.

"Next time hold something back," he said confusedly. "There's just so much that human flesh and blood can stand, you know."

"And you have so little of either," Toffee said. She gazed at him

reflectively. "Kissing you is like tying on your bib over a plate of bleached bones."

"Leave it to you to paint a disgusting picture," Marc shuddered.

"Give me a good heaping plate of bleached bones any time," Toffee said. "I'd prefer it."

"May I remind you," Marc said coolly, "that it was you who hurled yourself into my arms? You seemed to be all for it at the time."

"Merely the touch of the artist," Toffee said archly. "Just fitting myself into a part."

"Have I ever thought to tell you," Marc said, "that you are the most unprincipled, low-minded . . .?"

Then suddenly his voice dried in his throat. His gaze darted away from Toffee's face and swept frightenedly across the horizon.

"Oh, my gosh!" he cried.

Suddenly, like a slow dissolve in a movie, the little valley was simply melting away into black nothingness. Already the distant trees had disappeared. Marc jumped to his feet.

"Look!" he yelled. "Look!"

Toffee was instantly beside him. For a moment she gazed on the horrifying spectacle, then tugged imperatively at his sleeve.

"Come on!" she cried. "Let's run!"

But as they turned in the other direction the blackness only rushed at them anew; it was coming all around them. They stopped short.

"Will we drop away into nothing?" Toffee wailed, "or just melt away with everything else?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Marc moaned.

And perhaps a bit sooner, it seemed, for even as Marc spoke, the darkness swooped to within yards of them.

Toffee drew close to Marc, trembling a bit, and he placed his arm about her shoulders. They stood in expectant silence for a moment, watching the greenness disappear around them. Then, all at once, it was gone beneath them.

It was just as they plunged downward into the darkness that Toffee threw her arms about Marc's neck and held tight . . .

THE world reeled drunkenly through space . . . whirled away with egg-shaped lopsidedness . . . and then there was nothing left anywhere but the original dough from which everything had been made in the first place . . . messy, clammy stuff . . . and you sank deeper and deeper into it no matter how hard you struggled. Marc tried to cry out . . .

And then there was an answer, a scraping of metal on metal. A light showed ahead, dulled and heavily diffused, but it came suddenly. A voice spoke encouragement . . .

"Just a minute, and I'll dig you out. How you ever managed to get

snarled up like that flat on your back . . . ”

The voice continued scolding him with affection, and a minute later the doughy mass was pulled aside, and he could see that it was only the perspiration-covered sheets. He looked at them, then beyond them to Julie's gently smiling face. Morning was crowding into the room through the windows behind her.

“Morning,” he said sheepishly. “Thanks.”

In silence Julie handed him a glass of orange juice, and he boosted himself forward to drink it.

“How's your . . . your back?” she asked tentatively. “Is it better?”

Marc returned the glass to her, tried a few movements involving his mummified spine. There was no definite pain, only a suggestion of stiffness.

“Brand new,” he said, and smiled.

“Oh, I'm so relieved!” Julie breathed. She sat down close beside him on the bed. “I'm sorry, Marc.”

For a moment they only looked at each other. Then, suddenly breaking into laughter, they fell into each other's arms.

“Oh, Marc!” Julie cried. “I haven't been so happy in months. I don't know why. Nothing's changed; everything's in the same old mess, and considering what I did to you last night I ought to feel

just awful. But I don't, and I just can't explain it.”

“Maybe I can,” Marc said slowly. “I think . . . just before I fell asleep last night . . . I think something very important occurred to me. I think . . . !”

Suddenly his voice degenerated into a thin wheeze as the air rushed out of his lungs. He looked as though nothing of even minor importance had passed through his mind from the day of his birth. Julie looked up at him with anxious surprise.

“What is it, dear?” she asked. “What's wrong?”

Marc didn't answer; he only stared—into the mirror across the room. Even as he watched, the horrifying thing he had witnessed a moment before repeated itself.

Across the room, almost exactly opposite the mirror was a small alcove, just big enough to accommodate his desk and filing cabinet. When the compartment was not in use a set of curtains concealed its existence. It was the reflection of these curtains and their sudden curious behavior which had set Marc's hair on end.

FOR curtains which were meant only to hang blissfully on metal rods and behave themselves, these were weaving about in a most distressing fashion. In fact they were carrying on in such a loose-minded way that it was a wonder

Marc did not return his head to the cover of the soggy sheets and leave it there just to be spared the sight.

As it was, Marc peered wildly into the mirror as the curtains suddenly parted themselves, took on individual lives of their own, and began to twist about in the air in a way that defied all reason. This continued for several seconds, then matters got worse.

The curtain on the left retreated from the performance and hung limp. Marc sighed a sigh of relief, only to catch his breath in a new convulsion of horror. The curtain on the right, not content with behaving like something human, had decided to look like something human as well. Actually, in the manner of a close fitting dress, the thing began to assume bumps and hollows of an extremely feminine and alarming nature. It was then, and only a moment before a flash of red hair showed around the edge of the curtain, that Marc realized the awful truth of the situation; Toffee had materialized. She had materialized in his bedroom, without any clothes, and was trying to fashion a dress for herself from the draperies.

"Darling!" Julie cried. "Why are you looking like that? What's the matter?"

Julie's voice suddenly reminded Marc of the real danger in the situation. He glanced up, reached out and gripped Julie's shoulders

just in time to prevent her turning about to see what he was staring at.

"There's nothing wrong!" He laughed falsely. "Everything's wonderful! Wonderful! Go get me some breakfast!"

"What?" Julie asked confusedly.

But Marc's gaze had again been captured by a movement in the mirror. As he looked up Toffee's reflection smiled brightly at him and waved.

"Stay where you are!" Marc gibbered. "Go back!"

"What?" Julie asked.

Marc looked at her unhappily. "I'm starving!" he gibbered. "Get me something to eat! I may start gnawing on the bedpost in a minute!"

"But you just said for me to stay where I was. Why?"

"Yes, yes, I know," Marc said. He smiled feebly. "What I mean is that I'm hungry and want breakfast, but I hate to see you leave to get it because . . . because it's so nice to see you this morning . . ."

JULIE smiled uncertainly and patted his head. "I'll get you something right away," she said. "But I'll hurry."

"Oh, don't!" Marc said. "Take all the time you want!"

Julie looked at him quizzically and started to rise from the bed. Unfortunately for everyone's peace of mind Toffee chose that moment to stick one shapely leg around the

edge of the curtain.

"Don't!" Marc yelled.

Julie sat down quickly and reached a hand to Marc's brow. "But how can I get breakfast if I don't leave?" she asked patiently.

Marc turned to her with an harassed expression. "You can't!" he cried. "That's just it! So leave! Go on! Go 'way!"

"What!" An expression of utter hopelessness came over Julie's face.

"Go!" Marc said desperately. "Hurry!"

Julie stared at him for a long moment. "Are you sure you aren't harboring some sort of terrible grudge against me for what I did last night?" she asked slowly. "I'll understand perfectly if . . ."

"No, no, no!" Marc broke in. "I was never more fond of you than I am right at this minute. Go away."

"All right," Julie said. "I'm going. But don't call me back this time the minute I make a move for the door."

"I won't," Marc said. "I'll be silent as the grave."

Julie leaned forward to kiss him lightly on the forehead, then started across the room toward the door. "I'll be back practically instantly."

Quickly, Marc whirled around and stared in the direction of the alcove. As he did so the blood in his veins was sorely put to it whether to run hot or cold; Toffee, curvaceous as a serpent and twice as

fleshy, had stepped from behind the curtains and, at the moment, had arranged herself into a posture of highly seductive nature. This, judging by her expression, she considered humorous in the extreme. Not so, Marc.

"No!" he cried. "Stop!"

Julie did not bother to turn around; she merely stopped where she was in the doorway and placed her hands carefully on her hips. "Oh, no!" she groaned. "I've married a man who fancies himself a traffic signal!"

"No!" Marc yelled. "Not you!"

"Then who?" Julie asked with thredbare patience. The twenty-seven little men with pointed heads sitting on the bureau? Is that who you mean, dearest?"

"Just go!" Marc implored her. "Go!"

"Stop, go, stop, go, stop go!" Julie shrielled. "I am not operated electrically. More's the pity!" Slowly she started to turn around to face her ever-changing spouse and — eventually — the nakedest redhead any wife ever had the sheer horror of discovering in her husband's bed chamber.

MARC felt fate bearing down on him in a way that made him understand the feelings of a deeply rooted daisy looking up at an approaching steam roller. He turned away and closed his eyes in the cowering aspect of one who expects

to receive a load of brickbats on the nape of the neck. He stood, his nerves alerted against Julie's cry. There was a beat of silence—then it came.

But it was not the cry that Marc had braced himself against. This cry was sharply out of character, not at all the triumphant caw of a wronged wife laying hand to definite proof of her husband's perfidy. This was sheerly, unmistakably a cry of basic, physical pain.

Marc opened his eyes and turned around, then started back with a gasp of surprise. Julie, the beauty who always walked in regal stateliness, whose every move and gesture was a masterpiece of living poetry, was suddenly squatting in the doorway, clutching at herself in a way which was not only ungainly but downright repellent.

For a long moment surprise rendered Marc totally incapable of action. Then with a burst of logic and simultaneous realization, he whirled in Toffee's direction. Suddenly, this whole shuddering situation was all too clear to him.

Toffee, now completely emerged from her place of hiding, turned and smiled at him in a conspiratorial and knowing way. Marc noticed that her left hand was raised significantly in Julie's direction, while the right was held over the face of the curious ring, as though shading it.

He stared at her in horror; he couldn't imagine exactly what part

the unearthly ring was playing in Julie's unlovely predicament, but he was absolutely certain that it was responsible to some degree or another. He was stunned beyond caution.

"Stop that," he demanded angrily. "Stop that instantly!"

Julie, still crouching in the doorway, her back to the room, trembled violently and turned her eyes to the ceiling.

"Do you think I'm doing this because I like it?" she gritted between clenched teeth. "Do you actually imagine I wouldn't stop it if I could, you beast?"

"Now, Julie . . . !" Marc turned about, held out an imploring hand to her arched back.

"You shut up, you vindictive vermin!" Julie hissed, announcing her sentiments through the length of the outer hallway. "So you bear no grudge, huh? Hah! I'm only surprised you didn't break your back under the load!"

"Julie . . . !" Marc pleaded. "You don't under . . . !"

"No!" Julie broke in. "Oh, no! Don't you dare say I don't understand! And don't tell me I don't know when I've been brutally, wantonly and vengefully kicked from and in the rear!"

"Julie!" Marc gasped. "I didn't kick you. I know it's hard to believe, but . . ."

"You're darned tootin' it's hard to believe!" Julie sneered. "In fact

it's impossible to believe, you liar!"

"But . . . !"

"Well, aren't you at least going to call the doctor? As inhuman as we both now know you to be, there must be some slim thread of decency somewhere in the tacky fabric of that character of yours."

Marc turned beseechingly to Toffee.

"Please," he implored her. "*Please!* You're not helping matters, you know, in taking that attitude."

"Ohhh!" Julie groaned. "I didn't take this attitude, I was kicked into it!"

WITH a bland smile Toffee nodded to Marc. Then carefully she removed her hand from the ring, and there was a bright glitter from its surface. Toffee winked broadly and stepped back into the alcove. In the doorway Julie straightened instantly and turned around, her hands clenched tightly at her sides. She stretched her back tentatively.

"Well, I'm all right again," she announced heavily. "No thanks to you, Mr. Wife Kicker!"

"Julie . . .," Marc began, "you've got to listen to me!"

"Oh, no, I don't!" Julie corrected him emphatically. "I don't have to listen to you. All I have to do is convince myself that I like that lamp over there too well to shatter it on your skull." Calming herself

with an effort, she eyed him with controlled malevolence. She breathed deeply. "I think I can trust myself now not to run to the kitchen for the ice pick." She turned away. "Goodbye, Mr. Marcus Pillsworth!"

"Julie . . . !"

"And may your soul blister in everlasting hell!" Julie added as she swept out of the room and into the hallway.

Marc stood undecided for a moment. He started toward the hall, then checked himself and spun around in the direction of the alcove. Two striding steps brought him to the drapes, and with a single sweeping gesture of outrage, raked them aside. Toffee was disclosed sitting on the edge of the desk, one leg crossed casually over the other, blowing on her nails. She glanced up and smiled innocently.

"Lo," she said.

"Why you slithering little reptile!" Marc barked. "Of all the witless stunts . . . !"

Toffee wagged a slender finger at his costume. "Has anyone ever told you how cunning you look in those pajamas?" she murmured. "Are they ripped that way on purpose for ventilation?"

With a seizure of modesty Marc snatched at the curtains and clutched them around him. He looked rather like a Roman senator with his toga slipping. Toffee laughed.

"I thought that would put the

muzzle on you, you old Puritan," she said.

MARC drew himself up to his full six feet and two inches, and eyed her with lofty disdain. "You're in a nice position to talk," he observed frigidly.

"I'm in a nice position for a lot of things," Toffee sighed, "but you'd never notice."

Marc cleared his throat and averted his eyes. "Don't be brazen," he said. "I would offer you these curtains if I didn't need them so desperately myself."

"Always the perfect host," Toffee commented.

"Never mind me," Marc said. "What about you? Whatever possessed you to do a thing like that?"

"Like what?"

"Oh, stop it," Marc said wearily. "It was perfectly evident that you were at the bottom of that little demonstration."

"At the bottom?" Toffee laughed. "You put it so well. Unless you wanted to say I was at the seat of things."

"There you go. Just give you a simple statement and you squeeze enough dirt out of it to start a truck farm." Marc agitated his drapes. "Either you tell me what you're up to or I'll stop projecting you if I have to belt myself over the head with a sledge hammer."

Toffee smiled slowly. "I might as well make a clean breast of it,"

she said. "If the anatomical reference doesn't strike you as too racy?"

"Never mind," Marc said shortly. "You wouldn't recognize a moral scruple if it were presented to you in a glass jar."

"Very well," Toffee said. "Apparently you've guessed the function of my ring." She held up her hand and the fearsome ornament glittered brightly. "Actually the stone projects a ray which, in effect, sensitizes the bones and tissues of the human body, separates them slightly according to how long you time the concentration, and holds them apart. Maybe you noticed that Julie, just before her accident, was slightly taller than usual. Anyway, once you have the subject focused, it's only a matter of breaking the ray quickly with the other hand. Things, drawn apart and out of line snap back with such a force that the subject might just as well be struck with a hammer." She looked at Marc. "See what I mean?"

"I think so," Marc said slowly. "In other words you focused the radiation on the base of Julie's spine, drew . . . uh . . . things out of line, broke the suspending force suddenly, so that they jarred together with such momentum that they were thrown out of place . . . the sacroiliac, in this case."

"Exactly," Toffee said. "In ef-

fect, I simply gave your wife a good rousing kick in the . . . ”

“Croup,” Marc supplied quickly.

“In the croup,” Toffee agreed. “And when I wanted her to get over it I merely pulled the . . . things . . . apart again, then released them more gently so as to return them to their proper adjustment.”

“But what I want to know,” Marc said evenly, “is just what possessed you to demonstrate this diabolical little gadget on Julie?”

“Two reasons,” Toffee explained. “First to make sure the ring works the way I planned it, second to get Julie out of the way.”

“Get her out of the way?” Marc repeated apprehensively. “Now look here if you have any sordid notions about a dalliance on a divan, for instance . . . ”

“I always have those notions,” Toffee said. “However at the moment I’m having them in conjunction with other notions.” She smiled prettily. “I’ve come to straighten out the world.”

“You *what?*” Marc asked incredulously.

“You will admit it needs straightening out?” Toffee asked complacently.

“Well, yes,” Marc said. “But believe me the one thing it doesn’t need is your ministrations. It couldn’t take it. And I wish you’d get rid of that filthy ring.”

“Why should I?” Toffee asked.

“After all it was just as much your idea as mine.”

“My idea?” Marc said. “How do you figure that?”

“You said it plain as anything,” Toffee said, “last night, just before you went to sleep. You said the world needed a good swift kick.”

“Oh, my gosh!” Marc said. “And so you’ve . . . !” He pointed at the ring.

Toffee nodded proudly. “I’m the girl that’s right in there with the goods. Everything will be just dandy in no time.”

“OH, Lord!” Marc groaned. “Of all the things I’ve said in my life, you would have to pick on that!” He stopped, sighed heavily, looked at her long and wearily. “Well, you can just pack up your ring and your sex appeal and trot right back to where you came from. Of all the idiotic notions . . . !”

“Huh-uh,” Toffee shook her head. “It’s an idea that appeals to me. Besides, if enough of the right people get kicked in the right places . . . well, what have we got to lose?”

“Also,” Marc said coolly, “I don’t believe I thanked you yet for wrecking my home. I take it that is a sample of your methods for establishing unity and good will?”

“Good will?” Toffee smiled. “I have other methods for that.” She slid off the edge of the desk and moved purposefully toward him.

“You lay a hand on these drapes,”

Marc said nervously, "and I'll scream. I mean it! Julie is still here, you know."

Just then, as though to deliberately make a liar of him, the front door slammed downstairs.

"We are quite, quite alone," Toffee murmured significantly.

"Go away!" Marc said, trembling in his draperies. "Go back where you came from. Heaven knows things are bad enough already . . ."

"Oh, stop it," Toffee said. "We have business to attend to."

"Business?"

"Yes. As long as I've gotten myself all materialized to save the world I suppose I might just as well pitch in and get it over with. Business before pleasure, as they say. I figure I can have these world affairs you've been brooding over set ship-shape in less time than it takes a flat-chested girl to shuck on her girdle. Then I'll be free to concentrate on you without interruption."

"No!" Marc said suddenly. "I don't know why I waste my time listening to this prattle. Save the world! Indeed! I'm taking you down to the office where you can't harm anyone and leave you there till you decide to evaporate. Both the world and I have enough headaches already."

"You've dropped your drapes," Toffee observed mildly.

"Hang the drapes!" Marc said forcibly and, taking a hitch in his

gaping pajamas, strode into the bathroom . . . and locked the door.

DRIVING, particularly toward the center of the city, had lately become hazardous; the motorist never knew what insanity awaited him just around the next corner. At an intersection Marc stopped the car before a group of white-haired, bonneted old ladies who were gleefully engrossed in a game of croquet that had something to do with knocking your opponent's ball into an open manhole. At the sound of Marc's horn one of the aged gamesters glanced around demurely and peered at him through silver-rimmed glasses.

"Can it, you creep," she shrilled. "You wanna louse my shot?"

She might have said more except that her attention was suddenly drawn to the manhole, where the grimy head of a workman rose slowly like a soiled and rather timid moon. Lifting her skirts delicately so that only the minimum of ankle was exposed the lady minced daintily forward and belted the head a stunning blow with her mallet. Without a murmur the head retreated once more into the depths of the city sewage system.

"Danged whelp keeps poppin' up and spoilin' our innocent fun," the old lady said sullenly. "Does it just to aggravate us. She turned to one of her companions. "Shag me the bottle, Lana."

The lady in question produced a bottle of bourbon from the folds of her skirt. "Right-o, Rita," she said. "Blood in your eye!"

Marc shook his head sadly, but Toffee, huddled beside him in one of his topcoats, saw a certain charm in the sketch.

"Personally," she said, "I like to see folks growing old disgracefully. It makes the inevitability of age more attractive. After a lifetime of perfecting sins and vices you ought to be able to take them with you at least as far as the grave."

Passing by this bit of lopsided philosophy, Marc wheeled the car onto the sidewalk and skirted the field of play.

"The whole world's gone mad," he murmured.

It was a block later, at the sight of the Empire Department Store, that Toffee instructed Marc to stop the car.

"I want to pick up a few fine feathers," she explained. "I may want to take a flier later on."

"You won't need clothes," Marc informed her. "The office is most informal these days, especially since the staff has left."

"If I'm going to languish," Toffee said, "I'm going to do it in silks and satins. Besides, if you don't stop I'll darned well cripple you with my jewelry."

Marc pulled the car to the curb without further discussion.

THEY left the car and entered the Empire, where aisles and counters stretched into the distance over gleaming floors. A dark girl with circles under her eyes lounged dreamily at a counter displaying gloves and handbags. They approached. But just as they did so a short, stocky individual in a turtle-neck sweater hurried up to the girl from the opposite direction. He stopped abruptly and stuck a revolver in the girl's face, waggling it just beneath her nose. Crossing her eyes drowsily, the girl observed the gun. then the man.

"Oh, fer Cris'sake," she murmured.

"Hand over the cash, sister," the man growled.

"Okay," the girl yawned. "Only don't rush me, see?" She reached under the counter and brought forth a bag such as money is kept in. She scratched herself delicately and dropped the bag on the counter. "I figured I'd have it ready this time," she said. "Anything else, sir?"

"Yeah," the thug snarled, brandishing the gun anew. "Now lay down on the floor and don't open your trap until I'm gone."

"Aw, that corny routine, huh?" the girl sneered.

"G'wan!"

The girl shrugged indifferently. then boosted herself away from the counter and disappeared slowly beneath its horizon. The thug depart-

ed in the direction of the street.

For a moment Marc and Toffee were left to ponder this episode in solitude, then the girl slowly reappeared, leaned her elbows on the counter. She swiveled her bored eyes in their direction apathetically.

"Yuh want something?" she drawled.

"Aren't you going to scream or something?" Toffee asked with quiet curiosity.

"Scream?" the girl asked. "What'd I want to scream for?"

"Well," Toffee said. "It may be that I'm just the excitable type, but if I'd just been robbed I'd sound off like a crash alarm."

"Oh, that," the girl murmured. "That wasn't nothin', honey. Take a look over there."

Marc and Toffee gazed in the direction she indicated—a counter laden with expensive handbags. As they looked a hand darted furtively from beneath the counter, grasped one of the bags and instantly disappeared again. A moment later the action was repeated.

"What in the . . . ?" Marc said.

"A purse snatcher," the girl said. "He's good, too. He can clean out a whole counter in half an hour sometimes."

"Don't you care?" Toffee asked.

"I should care," the girl shrugged. "They're stealin' the store blind from end to end. What's the diff? What's the store going to do with money when it's blasted off

the face of the earth?"

TOFFEE and Marc, before they had had time to digest this, were diverted by a small movement at the end of the counter. The face of the thug who had presumably just departed appeared briefly from behind a display of gloves.

"Psst!" it said.

"The place is infested!" Toffee said.

"Excuse me," the salesgirl said, "I'll be right back. If you see anything you like just slip it into your stocking, honey." She ambled over to the glove display. "Yeah?" she inquired.

The face was joined by a hand bearing the money bag.

"Here," he said, "I din' take nothin' outa it."

"Don't you want it?" the girl asked.

"Let's do it over again," the thug said. "Only this time give it a little somethin', will yuh? Scream and carry on a little bit so's I can get the feel of it better."

"Oh, okay," the girl said listlessly. She accepted the bag and returned to Marc and Toffee. "What-a pest," she said. "All day all he does is hold me up, that's all. just hold me up. I get tired of it."

"Doesn't the manager mind this sort of thing?" Marc asked.

"Geez, no," the girl said. "The manager don't mind anything any more. Why should he? He'll cork

off just as fast as the janitor when the bombs drop."

At this juncture the thug stepped from behind the glove display, waving his gun excitedly.

"This is a stickup!" he announced.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," the girl murmured. "What else?"

"Go on an' scream," the bandit said in a lower tone. "You said you would. You promised."

"So okay," the girl agreed. She turned to Marc and Toffee. "You see how it is—borin'." Then she threw back her head and gave vent to a shriek that echoed back from the high ceiling with all the painful discord of a trainload of jealous opera stars going through an underpass in full voice. When it was over she leaned back on the counter and stifled a yawn. "So was it okay?" she asked.

"Not bad," the bandit said admiringly. "Now hand over the dough and git down on the floor!"

"Aw, have a heart," the girl said. "I've been down on the floor so much today I'm beginning to feel like a dust mop." She nodded to Marc and Toffee. "Make them get down on the floor for a change."

The thug glanced around, then quickly away. "I couldn't!" he whispered. "They're total strangers!"

"Take the money and git," the girl said. "And don't come bringin' it back, 'cause I'm through for to-

day. I'm bushed."

"Okay," the thug said. "Okay. You don't have to get sore about it!" Drawing himself up, he departed in a huff of indignation.

"Now," the girl said. "What was it you wanted?" But just then the hand of the purse snatcher eased up to the counter and started edging toward her. She reached out and dealt it a stinging blow. "Sometimes he takes it into his head to pinch some things that ain't purses," she explained. "A girl's got to keep an eye on the shifty little devil or she might get the shock of her life."

"Where could we find the manager of the store?" Marc asked. "I think if we talked to him directly . . ."

JUST then from across the store came the fearsome sound of steel jaws closing with a vicious snap, this accompanied by the clatter of chains and a blood-chilling shriek of pain.

"That's the manager now," the girl said unconcernedly. "I guess Dolly's got him trapped again. I'd know his scream anywhere."

"Trapped?" Toffee asked.

"Yeah. Over in the sport's department. Last week she got him in a lion snare, but I guess she's back to her bear traps this week. They cripple him up so he can't get away so fast."

"This Dolly," Toffee said. "She

bears the manager ill will?"

"Oh, no," the girl said. "She's crazy about him. She's been after him for years and never got anywhere at all. I guess she figures time's runnin' out."

"And this sport's department," Toffee asked. "They have a department just for sports? I mean, is this manager considered a sport?"

"He's game," the girl said. "Let's put it that way. The sport's department is where they sell equipment."

"At least this Dolly suits the locale to the action," Toffee said.

Just then the atmosphere was rent with another bellow of agony.

"Come on," Marc said. "The poor devil needs help."

"Be careful," the girl called after them as they started away. "He's mean when he's cornered. Snarls and spits like a mad badger. And that Dolly, she's been mean all her life."

Marc and Toffee hurried to the sport's section and stopped at the entrance with a gasp of dismay. At the far end of the department a camping display was being utilized for a scene of mad action.

A young man of immaculate and personable countenance, one foot held fast between the jaws of a mammoth bear trap, was energetically distorting his features and making loud sounds of dissatisfaction.

The cause of his predicament, a large, athletic, sharp-featured fe-

male, wearing tortoise shell glasses and tennis shorts, stalked him from behind a teepee. She was carrying a baseball bat, and a mad light glittered in her eyes. It would have been apparent to even a retarded child with a disturbed psyche that the young man's chances were slim.

As Toffee and Marc watched, the young lady with the glasses leered evilly from around the edge of the teepee and flourished her bat in a few practice swipes.

"Ho-ha!" she cried with primitive triumph. "So I've got you at last, you stinker!" She paused to cackle fiendishly to herself. "You won't get away this time. I'm going to pound that thick coco of yours so hard you won't wake up for centuries. And when you wake up—you know what?"

THE young man, who had ceased to snarl at the beginning of this overwrought recital, looked around apprehensively. "No," he said. "What?"

"You are going to find yourself married, wed, hitched, spliced, mated, united, espoused, wived, coupled, joined and made one with me. You are going to be mine in twenty-three languages, in fifteen churches, ten civil ceremonies and a couple of uncivil ones I just thought up myself. How do you like them apples, Mr. Smart-stuff?"

"No!" the young man yelped, reaching for the jaws of the trap.

"No! Never!"

"Let go of that trap!" the girl yelled. "I'll lop your ears off just for the sheer hell of it!"

"We'd better lend a hand here," Marc said. "She'll kill him with love."

"I can't help admiring her frank, forthright manner," Toffee said. "And you can't deny that her intentions are almost too honorable. But I can see where a man might consider her undainty, especially the choosy kind." Marc started forward, but she reached out a hand and drew him back. "I'll take care of this," she said. She raised her hand and faced the ring in the direction of the infuriated Amazon.

"Hurry up!" Marc said. "Shoot the current to her before she mashes him to a pulp!"

Toffee carefully surveyed the scene of primitive love run amok. The assault on the hapless manager, no longer merely imminent, was developing rapidly into a crashing reality. The love-crazed Dolly had risen to her toes and hunched forward to gain the maximum devastation from the blow.

"Hurry!" Marc said, and Toffee drew her hand down sharply over the face of the ring. The results in addition to being instantaneous were staggeringly bizarre.

The stalking murderess abandoned her batting stance with a cry and straightened up throwing her hands over her head. The bat,

gaining its freedom all of a rush sailed high in the air and fell to the floor with a crash. Dolly, as suddenly as she had righted herself, fell into a tormented crouch and hugged her bottom with both arms in a fair fit of devotion to the awful thing. Her glittering eyes seemed to spin wildly in their sockets, and she clenched her teeth in a manner suggesting that she had bitten into a high voltage socket and was prepared to blow a whole bin full of fuses.

"Yeeeeee-ow!" she yelled in shrill tones.

THE captive manager, having devined from the tone of Dolly's voice that the skull-splitting project had run into a snag, opened his eyes and glanced around hope-preferred immeasurably having his expression underwent a change, so that he looked for all the world like a young man who would have fully. One peek, however, and his skull crushed to being confronted in this awful way with a crouching, teeth-gritting female who beyond any question of a doubt was preparing to spring upon him and rend him limb from limb with her bare fangs. He shuddered visibly and looked away. His lips quivered over prayers for an easy deliverance of his immortal soul. Toffee and Marc hurried forward to reassure him.

Once the young man was released,

he mopped his brow, glanced around with a sigh, and instantly spotted the fact that there remained something in the situation to be explained.

"What's the matter with her?" he asked of his erstwhile captor. "Why is she all hunkered down like that?"

"Either she's a hard loser," Toffee murmured, "or she needs more roughage. It's hard to say at a glance." She made a quick surreptitious pass at her ring, and the girl in question fell back limply on the false grass before the teepee.

"Who prodded me with a riveting machine?" she asked belligerently.

"I wish I had," the manager said, rubbing his ankle. He looked at the trap. "Damn thing's got a nasty bite. I tell you if I were a bear I'd be very careful around those things."

"You can't blame a girl if she's got ingenuity," Dolly said sullenly. "I almost got you, too, you slippery devil."

"You're fired," the manager said loftily.

"Oh, yeah?" Dolly said. "I don't quit, see? I haven't even tried guns, knives, hand grenades, bayonets, hand-to-hand combat and mouse-traps yet. I'm starting in on light side-arms tomorrow."

"Look," Marc said to the manager. "The young lady would like something to wear. We're in a hurry. I've got to get back home . . ."

"Fine," the manager said. "I was

on my way to the fashion salon when this morbid little affair befell me. I'm to meet Congressman Bloodsop there, too; he wanted to sit and look at the models. Come along."

And the three of them left, leaving the luckless Dolly thoughtfully testing the blade of a machete with the tips of her fingers.

"You see?" Toffee said to Marc. "You see how easily differences can be settled under the proper guidance?"

THE salon, it turned out, was on the fifth floor of the Empire. On the way the manager paused briefly in the silver department to confer with a small, detached looking lady called Miss Winters.

"Things going well?" he asked.

"Oh, divinely!" Miss Winters twittered. "Just like magic. They're simply cleaning out the department."

"Bolting the meat and picking the bones, eh?" the manager beamed. "Stealing everything in sight, are they?"

"Oh, just!" Miss Winters nodded. "To give them encouragement, every so often I close my eyes and feign deep concentration. Every time I open my eyes the place looks just a little more like a desert wasteland."

"Just blinking away the merchandise, so to speak?"

"How cleverly you put it, Mr. Baker! You always were the one

with the well-turned phrase, though." She colored prettily at her own boldness. "How would you like to hear that we've lost better than twenty thousand dollars just since opening this morning?"

"Splendid!" Mr. Baker said. "Splendid! Just keep up the good work, Miss Winters, and we'll be out of business in no time at all." As he turned away he smiled broadly at Marc and Toffee. "The sooner we unload all this junk the sooner we can close up and await the end with composure. As a matter of fact the advertising department has devised a little slogan: Steal at the Empire Before you Roast in Hell-fire! Clever, eh?"

"Frightfully," Toffee said, "in the strictest sense of the word."

"Good grief," Marc said. "They're so used to the idea of dying, they're getting flip about it."

"Maybe it's all for the best," Toffee said. "At least their last days will be pleasant."

IN the grey coolness of the fashion salon, Toffee, Marc and Mr. Baker, the manager, sank into low, comfortable chairs and accepted the services of a dark, aloof young lady who brought them drinks in tall, cool glasses. An orchestra played muted background music as from a misted distance. All in all the salon was a den of pleasant relaxation.

Girls of all types and unparal-

leled beauty paraded constantly in the latest words from the fashion centers of the world. Some of the fashion designers, Toffee concluded approvingly, were given to very brief and suggestive words. She also noted—again with approval—that most of those in attendance were males.

"They come here to make dates with the models," the manager explained. "But then the models come here to make dates with the men, so it's all right. I see Congressman Bloodsop hasn't arrived yet."

Toffee leaned forward interestedly. "The congressman?" she said. "Tell me, is this Congressman Bloodsop a man of influence? Does he have connections in high places?"

Marc interrupted the answer. "Pick out some clothes and let's leave," he said impatiently. "I have to get home and start looking for Julie."

"That can wait," Toffee said airily. She turned back to Mr. Baker with a smile. "You were saying . . . ?"

"The congressman has the best of connections," he said. "He's only been in office six months and he's already bilked the nation of millions."

"I see," Toffee said thoughtfully. "And if you were me and were picking out a dress that would interest Congressman Bloodsop what kind would you choose?"

"Something unobtrusive," the

manager said. "Nothing to obscure the view."

"I see," Toffee said. "The old gaffer has an eye out?"

"Both eyes. And so far out you could tick them off with a match."

"Something of a rounder, eh?"

"Everything of a rounder."

"Sounds almost too easy," Toffee mused.

"Here, now," Marc broke in. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing," Toffee said with great innocence. "A girl likes to make a good impression on persons of importance." She pointed to the model across the room who was displaying, besides quite a lot of epidermis, a dress made of a vaporish material which had been cut with an extremely frugal hand—almost grudging. "That dress—could I have that one?"

"Oh, that's a dinger, isn't it?" the manager said approvingly. "You might say it was practically made for Congressman Bloodsop." He brought the model over with a nod of the head.

"Madam wishes to see the dress?" the girl asked.

"Madam wishes to see the dress on madam," Toffee said. "The sooner the better."

"You got guts, honey," the model said. "And you'll need them, too, to keep this thing up."

THE two of them adjourned to the dressing rooms and Toffee

returned a moment later, the very picture of the most recent thing in scandalous *chic*. She joined Marc and Mr. Baker and took her place between them.

"How do you like it?" she asked Marc.

"You'd be more modest in a plastic shower curtain," Marc said. He boosted himself forward. "Come on."

"I want to meet the congressman," Toffee said. And even as she spoke a portly gentleman with a ruddy face and almost theatrically white hair appeared in the entry and started forward. "And I think I'm about to."

At the manager's limp wave, Congressman Orvil Bloodsop, the accomplished absconder of public funds, presented himself before the company. His eyes, true to forecast, registered a lively appreciation at the sight of Toffee. He nodded perfunctorily to Marc.

"These are some people I met in sporting goods," the manager said. "I haven't the least idea what their names are—or if they have any at all. They can tell you, if they think it's wise."

"What's in a name?" the congressman said with hackneyed gallantry. He got himself a chair and wedged it deftly between Toffee's and the manager's. "It's the . . . uh . . . heart that counts, eh?" He settled himself with a snort. "I don't believe I've ever seen you around before, dear. Where are you from?"

Toffee lowered her lashes with artful mystery. "A long way away," she said huskily.

"Stop that," Marc said. "Stop sounding like a movie vamp with a bad cold and come on."

"I have things to discuss with the congressman, haven't I, Congressman Bloodsop?"

"Why, of course, dear," the congressman said, leering at the things he hoped she referred to.

"What things?" Marc asked crudely.

"You'll see," Toffee said. "Enjoy the passing scenery." She turned back to Congressman Bloodsop. "I hear you've got some wonderful connections."

"Some of the best, dear."

"In Washington?"

"Straight up to the President," Orvil Bloodsop boasted. "All the way up."

"The President?" Toffee said. "Who's that?"

THE congressman looked at her twice to make sure she wasn't joking. "Why the President is Lemons Flemm," he said. "You know that. But perhaps you remember Lemons when he was a television comedian. That's how Lemons got elected, you know."

"During campaign time Lemons' sponsor refused to give up his air time for the candidates speeches. As a result everyone was trying to watch Lemons and the candidates

at the same time, and they got confused. When they counted the votes, Lemons was elected.

"And he's made the most entertaining president we've ever had. Taxes up one day and down the next. Anything for a laugh. Anything and everything goes."

"I see," Toffee said. "This comedian, then, is at the head of the government?"

"Right on the top of the heap. However, if any of us ever live to see another election I doubt that Lemons will be reelected. It seems that during the campaign there were a lot of people who thought the candidates were a lot funnier than Lemons."

"But this Lemons Flemm is running things?"

"A mile a minute," Orvil Bloodsop nodded.

"Then if someone were in possession of a really decisive secret weapon he'd be the man to contact, wouldn't he?"

"I doubt if he'd be interested," the congressman said. "Secret weapons have been done to death lately. Everyone's sick of them."

"Suppose this were something that gets in there where it does the most good and really makes itself felt?" Toffee asked anxiously.

"Something to make 'em rare back and take notice, huh?"

"Exactly."

"I see," the congressman said. "Then you're a foreign spy, aren't

you, selling out the old country? You've already said you were from far away. Tell me, how do you like our little country?"

"Love it," Toffee said. "That's why I want so badly to meet your President." She crossed her legs carefully, and no part of the movement was overlooked by the congressman.

"I see," he said. "You want to get up in the world where the bidding is high?"

"That's the idea," Toffee said. "Sort of wriggle my way into the affairs of state, so to speak."

"Brings to mind an exciting picture," the congressman commented. "Of course the best way to crash Washington society is to be investigated by the Congress. You may not believe it, dear, but we've made some of the very best international figures. But it's difficult to be investigated, especially for a spy like yourself, with credentials and all. That's too easy, and we have to concentrate on the more difficult cases—our personal enemies, for instance. However, a girl with your—uh—attributes might prove of sufficient diversion to warrant special attention."

"This Congress," Toffee said. "What is it?"

"Oh, just a body of men."

"Really!" Toffee's interest shot ahead like an arrow discharged from a sixty pound bow. "I would be investigated by this body of men?"

"Minutely, honey," the congressman assured her. "And from every angle."

TOFFEE was almost beside herself with anticipation; she almost forgot the purpose at hand. "I'll kill 'em," she said. She composed herself. "Could you arrange to have me hauled up for investigation?"

"Well . . . I wouldn't do it for just anyone, you know."

"But you would for me, wouldn't you? Don't forget; I do have a secret weapon."

"I'm not forgetting," the congressman murmured. "No, indeed. However, I'll have to convince the Congress that you're a substantial menace." He was thoughtful for a moment. "I think I'll call the Congressman from Idaho and say that you've been insulting his wife. I think something can be worked out." He rose.

"Just a minute," Toffee said. "There's just one more thing; include my friend, Mr. Pillsworth. Say he's been insulting Texas."

"Well . . ." the congressman hesitated.

"Please," Toffee cooed. "He might get his feelings hurt if we left him out."

"Well, okay," the congressman agreed, and left.

Seeing that there was an opening, Marc edged closer. "Is the congressman leaving?" he asked.

"He'll be right back," Toffee said pleasantly. "He's gone off to arrange something for me."

"What?" Marc said evenly. "Just what has he gone off to arrange?"

"Oh, just a little investigation."

"What kind of an investigation?"

"He mentioned something called Congress," Toffee said. "I think it's some kind of a club he belongs to."

"A Congressional investigation?"

"Uh-huh," Toffee nodded. "I believe those were his very words."

"Who's going to be investigated?"

Toffee smiled the sublimely innocent smile of one of heaven's nicer angels. "Me," she announced, "and you."

"What!" Marc jumped to his feet as though he'd been wrenched by a pulley. "Why you . . . ! What did you tell that old idiot?"

"Nothing really," Toffee said. "I just told him I had a secret weapon, and he assumed the rest. He's including you as a personal favor."

"Dear God in heaven!" Marc yelped. "Let's get out of here before he comes back!"

"Oh, no!" Toffee cried. "I have to wait and see if he could arrange it."

"Come on!" Marc said, taking her by the arm and dragging her out of her chair. "Where'd he go? We'll go the other way."

"I must say I don't understand your attitude," Toffee said woundedly, following him into the entry. "After I worked like a demon to

charm the daffy old vulture . . ."

"Just like a demon!" Marc said hotly. "Exactly-like a demon! You take the words from my mouth."

"And I should dip them in cyanide and put them right back!" Toffee said. "I suppose it hasn't penetrated your blunted intelligence that I'm only trying to do something to help save this preposterous world of yours."

"I see," Marc said. "You propose to save the world by ruining me. That makes such brilliant sense it fairly blinds me." By now they had reached the outer hallway and were covering space rapidly in the direction of the elevators.

"I'm not going to stand for it!" Marc said testily. "And that's my message to you." He stopped before the elevators and placed his finger firmly to the button. "If you think I'm going to allow my life to be governed by the noxious fermentations of that fluttering mind of yours . . . you're wrong!"

TOFFEE parted her lips for an angry reply, but just then the door across the hall opened, and Congressman Bloodsop appeared on the scene. His ruddy face was wreathed with smiles.

"Ah, there you are!" he boomed expansively. "Well, the news is good tonight. You're to be investigated tomorrow. I'm to take you into custody right now, and there'll be a couple of government boys to guard

you. You're to stay at my home under guard tonight, and we'll fly up to Washington in the morning for the festivities." He swayed back on his heels in a seizure of self-appreciation. "Fast action, eh?"

"Mr. Bloodsop . . . !" Marc sputtered. "Mr. Bloodsop . . . !"

But the congressman held up a hand. "No need to thank me, boy," he said. "It's nothing to pull a few strings for friends."

"Mr. Blood . . . !"

Just then the elevator doors slid back to disclose Dolly, the impassioned wild-gamester, struggling with the stringy vagaries of an enormous tuna net. She staggered forward and paused to disentangle a cork float from the door latch. Then, hunched forward under her burden, she started determinedly toward the salon.

"On the scent again already?" Toffee inquired amiably.

Dolly stopped and peered back over her muscular shoulder. "Uh-huh," she panted. "Only this time I've got a switcheroo for the sonof-a-gun. This time I not only toss him into the trap but fling myself in after him." She winked. "Get it?"

"In detail," Toffee said. She turned to Marc. "Isn't it nice to meet a girl who knows her own mind—even when it's cracked seven ways to Sunday?"

"You should know," Marc glowered. "You should damned well know, you little heller."

Congressman Bloodsop's study was a mammoth vault paneled solidly with the finest oak that purloined money could buy. It was vast-ceilinged and set solidly at one end with leaded windows of a thousand panes. Beyond the windows, like a magazine illustration, one could see formal gardens softened with twilight. To Toffee's mind it fairly stank with class.

FROM the depths of her leather-covered chair, she lowered her coffee cup to the table and observed the spectacle of Congressman Bloodsop sitting like a high magistrate behind a kennel-sized mahogany desk.

"Do the guards *have* to stay outside in the hallway?" she asked. "Won't they be lonesome?"

"A matter of form, dear," the congressman said. "Looks good. Besides, I've told the maid to give them tea."

Marc standing beside the fireplace stirred with agitation. "Mr. Bloodsop . . . !"

The congressman raised his eyes with slow patience. "Young man," he said evenly. "Is there something the matter with you? What is this curious compulsion of yours to rasp my name every few minutes? If you have something to say, say it."

"Yes, Marc," Toffee said sweetly. "Don't let the congressman think you're dull."

Marc choked, presumably with

emotion. "I only wanted to inquire just why I can't use the telephone to try to find my wife?" he said in a strained voice.

"Another matter of form," the congressman said. "Good heavens, man, do you really care so much to find your wife? It's the most extraordinary thing I've ever heard of. I must remind you that you and the young lady now constitute a matter for official inquiry."

Marc clenched his fists tight at his sides. "Oh, Christ!" he wailed.

"At least he's shouting for someone else for a change," the congressman said complacently. "An erratic type. Subversives usually are, though. Next he'll be calling for Phillip Morris."

"Poor Marc," Toffee put in appealingly. "He just can't bring himself to view the end of civilization with the same happy composure the rest of us do. It upsets him."

"No use fighting the inevitable," the congressman said. "When the whole country has gone gypsy, you might just as well snatch up your skirts, so to speak, and join in the innocent merriment."

"Seems a trifle fatalistic," Toffee said. "Sometimes I rather agree with Marc that you owe it to yourself to resist to the end . . . even if it's only an attitude. It seems more . . . human somehow."

"Thank you for that much," Marc said with heavy irony. "At least my attitude pleases you."

"Welcome, I'm sure," Toffee murmured, then turned back to the congressman. "Tell me, congressman, just who is it that's going to do all this bomb dropping anyway? I haven't heard any name mentioned yet."

THE congressman gazed at her. "You mean you're not really one of them, after all? You're with another interest?"

"A private concern, you might say," Toffee said.

"Well, it's a good thing we're investigating you then," the congressman said. "One does like to know who's killing one, you know. It gives you a clue whom to curse with your dying breath."

"But getting back to these others," Toffee said, "who is it? What country, I mean?"

"Why, You Know Where, of course," the congressman said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You Know Where, who else?"

"Did someone put something in my coffee," Toffee asked, "or are you just being terribly coy about this thing?"

"I'm not being coy at all, damn it," the congressman said. "You Know Where is the country."

"Good grief," Toffee said, "now he's lapsing into baby talk. Very well, congressman, if you can't bring yourself to tell me the name of the country in a straightforward manner, perhaps you'll just mention the man who's at the head of it."

Just as a hint."

"You Know Who," the congressman said flatly.

For a long moment there was silence as Toffee gazed toward the gardens with apparent serenity.

"All right, congressman," she said presently. "Just forget the whole thing. Forget I even mentioned it."

"Come here," the congressman said, drawing a globe atlas forward across his desk. "I'll show you."

Toffee got up and crossed to the desk. She followed the congressman's finger as it swept across the United States, brushed aside the Hawaiian Islands, and came to rest on a large country on the soiled outskirts of Europe. Quite plainly the country was marked: **YOU KNOW WHERE.**

"For heaven's sake!" Toffee exclaimed. "Why, that's . . . !"

"Don't!" the congressman broke in frightenedly. "Don't say that name! It's illegal. It was the government's idea that we should ignore the country, refuse to recognize it. It was hoped that if we just didn't speak to it any more and acted as though we didn't know it was there, it would go away and leave us alone. The use of the name was outlawed five years ago. Unfortunately, it's still there so we have to call it something."

"Very shrewd," Toffee said. "Reminds one of the tactics of sulky children. And this You Know Who,

I suppose, is the head of the government there?"

THE congressman reached across the desk and drew a newspaper toward them. On the front page was the picture of an elderly man in a short choke-collar effect. He had penetrating eyes and a drooping mustache.

"Oh," Toffee said, "you mean . . . !"

"You Know Who," the congressman supplied quickly.

"Of course," Toffee agreed. "Then as I see it the country is faced with the question of whether You Know Who from You Know Where is going to drop you know what on the USA?"

"Not whether," the congressman amended, "but when. Otherwise, you have stated the situation in a nutshell."

"And I can't think of a better place for it either," Toffee murmured. "Outside of a pecan pie it's the nuttiest situation I've ever heard of."

"Well," the congressman said, "there's nothing to be done about it now. Unless, of course, your secret weapon has some bearing on the crisis. But I doubt it. We've piled secret weapon on secret weapon and the situation has simply worsened with each one. It's very disheartening."

"I see," Toffee reflected. "It makes a murky state of affairs. However, if you could get people away from the idea of blowing each other up and reduce them to the old-fashioned, intimate methods of warfare . . ."

"Oh, Lord!" Marc moaned ag-grievedly.

"Well," the congressman sighed, "he's still in the religious cycle at least."

At that moment the door opened at the far end of the room, and a heavy-lidded French maid appeared in the opening and leaned exhaustedly against the sill.

"Someone smeared a French pastry on the woodwork," Toffee commented dryly.

"I have served the gentlemen in the hall tea for three hours," the maid sighed, shoving her hair out of her eyes. "They are the devil himself. They play funloving games, like children." She paused and sighed again. "Dinner is served, I presume."

The congressman boosted himself out of his chair. "I will speak to those funloving gorillas in person," he said. He turned to Toffee. "Are you hungry, my dear?"

"Famished," Toffee said, and looked at Marc. "And you?"

"Yeah," Marc said dolefully. "My wife is gone, my business is ruined, my world is about to go up in smoke—but what the heck!"

He turned a sardonic eye on the

congressman. "Lead on," he said. "Play, gypsy, play!"

TOFFEE sat down gingerly on the corner of the bed and surveyed the congressman's best guest room with voluptuous appreciation. It was a production in lace and rococo gilt in which the curly-cued, beflounced bed was lost like a fireworks display in a gaudy sunset. Toffee only regretted that such splendor, for her part, was only to be wasted.

It was not that she would not have willingly stayed the night there, had she the choice—but she had not. Being a thought projection of Marc's conscious mind, she would not exist in the material world when Marc slept. She had to return to the land of his imagination until he awoke again; then she would rematerialize wherever she chose. She looked at the bed, imagined the roseate picture of herself amongst the linens and laces, and sighed a sigh of regret.

She removed herself from the bed, went to the door and listened. There were sounds; the guard was still there. The other guard would be posted at Marc's door.

Toffee glanced at the ornamental clock on the bedstand. It was well after midnight, and she was still in the land of reality. That meant that Marc was still awake—and still worrying about Julie—and the bombs.

She crossed to the bed, sat down

as before, and ran her hand absently over the lace coverlette. Something had to be done to help Marc before he became a nerve case. It was true that she had gained the attention of the law makers, but now it seemed that the law makers were as irresponsible a group as one could wish for. And there might not be much time left. Something had to be done . . . something big . . . and in a hurry. If either side could be made to see the sheer idiocy of the situation. If, for instance, You Know Where . . .

Suddenly Toffee stood up.

"My gosh!" she cried. "If I could only . . . !"

She stopped suddenly and a gasp came to her lips. Even as she did so her very being seemed to fade a bit.

"Oh, no!" she cried. Then slowly she became more completely materialized again; Marc had yawned. She ran to the door and threw it open. Instantly the guard, a youngish ape in a dark suit, appeared before her.

"Yes, miss?"

"I've got to see Mr. Pillsworth!" Toffee cried. "He's going to sleep and he mustn't! Not yet." She started forward, but the guard stood firm.

"Sorry, miss," he said. "You're not permitted to see Mr. Pillsworth tonight."

"But I must!" Toffee cried. "He

has to stay awake until . . . !"

"I'm sorry, miss," the guard said, then looked at Toffee more closely. "Aren't you feeling well, Miss? You look a trifle pale around the gills."

"And what's worse," Toffee said, "I feel pale too."

"Well," the guard said helpfully, "I saw an advertisement once about a lady who recommended a vegetable compound very highly. Of course I couldn't be positive but I believe the lady's name was Sylvia Pinkham, or something of the sort. She was a very kind looking old lady . . ."

"LOOK," Toffee put in distractedly, "could I go to the study if you came with me? It's terribly important."

"Well," the guard reckoned, "all right. But don't you think you ought to lie down. This lady . . . Sylvia . . . seemed to think that other ladies should lie down . . ."

"Blast Sylvia Pinkham," Toffee said. "And blast her compound, too. Come on. Hurry!"

Together they hastened down the stairs. On the first floor the guard led the way to the study and switched on the lights. He watched Toffee with concern as she swept past him into the room.

"My, miss," he said. "You're looking paler every minute. You'll soon be nothing more than a ghost the way you're going."

Heedless, Toffee ran to the desk. There she reached for the globe and turned it with a hurried hand. The guard joined her curiously.

"Let's see," Toffee mused. "We're here. You Know Where is there." If you concentrated in a straight line in that direction . . . "

"Miss," the guard said softly. "I'm sure Miss Sylvia Pinkham wouldn't like it at all . . . "

"And I wouldn't like Miss Sylvia Pinkham at all," Toffee said shortly. She turned back to the globe. "This must be the capital of You Know Where, this heavy black dot over here. It is, isn't it?"

"Yes, Miss. But if you're thinking of going there, they won't let you in, you know. There's the Brass Curtain."

"I thought it was iron," Toffee said.

"It used to be. But after a few dealings with those people everyone decided it must be brass."

Without comment Toffee snatched up the newspaper and studied the picture of You Know Who as though she were committing the unlovely features to memory. Finally she set it aside and turned to the guard.

"There now," she said. "I think I've got everything fairly straight in mind. There's just one thing. Mr. Pillsworth is going to sleep now. Don't let him sleep too long—just a little while, then wake him up."

"Are you certain he'll want to . . . ?" the guard began.

"Don't forget," Toffee said positively. "It's a matter of life and death."

"Well, okay," the guard agreed. "I'll tell him you said . . . !"

"Then, with a gasp, the poor man's voice descended down his throat with the gritty rattle of a parcel of bones dumped into a disposal. As he watched, shaken to the very roots of his soul, the girl by the desk gradually faded into thin air . . .

DUSK had come to a distant land.

Toffee stood in the formidable square and looked with disfavor on the great concrete pilings that brooded over the clear area in the center and isolated it from the waning light of day. Functional architecture, with frippery—cold, grey and starkly oppressive. Very functional, like a straight jacket, and just as pleasant to look at.

There were hardly any signs of human life. A couple of men, so grey and so gross that they seemed only a part of the buildings around them, lumbered down the steps of the largest and most formidable of the structures, stopped to look at Toffee curiously, then passed on. Toffee shrugged and turned toward the building from which they had just come. The best way to obtain information, after all, was to ask

someone for it. And if those men had just come from the building, life must exist inside the place in spite of appearances.

She had no more than set foot on the steps of the place, however, than life suddenly descended upon her in a rush; two grey-uniformed guards, seemingly patterned very closely on the physical and spiritual makeup of the gorilla, clumped down the steps toward her with bayonets fixed. One of them barked something that, to Toffee, had no specific meaning. The bayonets, pointing in the vicinity of her midsection, spoke with great eloquence. Toffee felt keenly that the moment called for a disarming smile.

"Don't be silly, boys," she said with arch modulation. "There's no occasion for manly demonstrations."

There was a sputtered, incoherent exchange between the two, interspersed with moments of silence which allowed them time to stare in open-mouthed wonderment at the lightly - swathed redhead before them. Toffee listened to this for what seemed the proper social interval, then started determinedly forward. The bayonets, however, thrust a little closer, took all the verve and sweep out of the gesture.

"Now, kids," Toffee said, "I don't want to have to get rough with you." And so saying she reached out, delicately parted the bayonets, and passed between them. Their owners, obviously unused to this

open flaunting of the sword, turned to stare after her in petrified astonishment. After a stunned silence, there ensued a growl-and-spit interchange of thought on the matter.

Though Toffee had no way of knowing it, one aborigine inquired of the other if they were eye to eye in the opinion that they were seeing things. The other replied in the affirmative, adding that if it were not illegal to entertain such notions, he might venture that they had just been bypassed by an angel from heaven. Of course, since everyone knew that heaven and angels did not exist, the notion was silly.

"Nothing descends from heaven but bombs," his companion observed with native starkness. "The Great Leader has said it is so."

"Then it is so, and we are only the victims of a delusion."

Shrugging their massive shoulders they returned to their posts and hoped for the best.

INSIDE the building Toffee found herself confronted by a wide foyer from which innumerable corridors stretched away in all directions. Guards of a similar stamp to those who had accosted her on the steps literally infested the place, two to the corridor. They seemed so much a part of the sombre decor, however, that Toffee did not notice them at once. She had proceeded nearly to the center of the

room before, overtaken by a certain feeling of uneasiness, she stopped and reconnoitered.

As she glanced around, the walls began to bristle with bayonets. She appraised this nasty state of affairs with concern and decided to adopt the policy of the congressman and his colleagues. A song on her lips, if not in her heart, she fixed her eyes straight ahead on the center corridor and resumed nonchalantly in that direction — perhaps if she pretended that these bayoneted orangoutangs were beneath her notice they might go away and leave her alone. They didn't appear to be the friendly, informative type anyway.

For one brief moment it seemed that the ruse, by dint of sheer boldness, was going to work. Toffee was almost to the corridor when one of the benumbed guards suddenly began to vocalize in an overwrought fashion. In a voice that slammed against the vaulted ceiling like a trumpet blast he shouted something that sounded loosely like, "Garrenovitch!" His tone did not convey the feeling of warm welcome. Toffee, sizing the situation up as the sort that only comes to a head with delay, bolted.

She darted into the corridor and kept going at a pace that utilized her lovely legs to the utmost. A noisy clatter from the rear, however, told her that she was not in the sprint just for exercise. She

renewed her efforts. Then suddenly stopped.

It wasn't so much that the corridor terminated in a huge doorway only a few yards ahead—though that was bad news enough—the real thing was that before the door there stood not two but four enormous guards, supplied like the others with those ugly weapons. The guards and Toffee caught sight of each other simultaneously, but the really filthy part of it was that the surprise element in the incident shoved the guards into action while it only held Toffee motionless.

TOFFEE needed no one to tell her she was about to be surrounded. "I *would* have to get into this place," she sighed. "It must be a barracks for guards." She watched with resignation as the bulky bayoneters formed a prickly circle around her. She chose the most likely-looking of her captors and smiled enchantingly into his sub-ugly face. But the favored one only reciprocated with a small jabbing gesture which was enthusiastically picked up and elaborated upon by his companions. Toffee was the first to realize that the situation was climbing toward that state which is often described as 'serious.'

"Look out, you lumbering oafs," she said hotly. "You could play hell with a lady's dainties with that sort of thing."

She considered her ring and the hoard of armed brutes around her; there were too many of them to deal with effectively. The situation called for help, and Toffee took her cue from the situation; though she didn't know the language she was willing to kick it around a bit.

"Helpovitch!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. "Helpovitch!"

The result that followed was as instantaneous as it was unexpected. No sooner had Toffee's voice split the air of the hallway than the guards froze where they were and stared at her in a transfix of horror. Toffee hadn't the faintest notion of what she had said but she was awfully glad to have said it.

Experimentally she made a movement; the guards remained still. She stepped out of the circle, and one of the guards made a small movement of protest.

"Helpovitch, you rat," Toffee said. "You heard me."

The guard remained motionless.

Toffee paused, selected the door at the end of the hall as her destination, and went rapidly toward it. As she drew abreast of it, it opened just a crack and an ear presented itself in the opening. Apparently someone had been disturbed by the noise in the hall. Toffee leaned forward and placed her mouth close to the ear.

"Helpovitch," she whispered.

There was a moment, then the ear shuddered delicately, after

which it turned red and withdrew quickly from sight. Here, Toffee realized, was the sort of ear that responded to a firm hand. She shoved the door open, stepped inside, and closed it behind her. Then she turned about — and stopped short.

IT wasn't so much the room which, large and marbled, was a gasping matter all in itself—but the room's occupant; the ear had been misleading for its owner was none other than You Know Who himself. Between the Great Leader and Toffee there wasn't much to choose for goggle-eyed surprise. Toffee, however, was the first to recover from the encounter.

"Well," she said, "just the old villain I'm looking for!"

The Great Leader, his eyes retreating back into their sockets, set his mustache atremble with a great sucking breath and launched into a series of resonant sounds.

"Knock it off," Toffee commanded. "You're making a fog in here. Besides, I can't understand a word of that juicy jazz."

"So!" the Leader exploded. "Who iss? How you got har, hah?"

"Well," Toffee murmured reflexively, "at least you can speak English — using the language loosely, that is."

"How come you har, hey?" the Leader insisted truculently. "Why not soldiers kill you forst?"

"They had it in mind," Toffee said, "but I just said 'helpovitch' to them, and they dropped the whole thing."

"Vooman!" the Leader gasped. "You say soch dorthy vord it is only sooprise soldiers do not drop teeth along with thing!" He waved his hand. "Go vay, dorthy gor! Screm!"

"For Pete's sake!" Toffee said. "What does the word mean?"

"Don't ask!" the Leader gasped, throwing up his hands. "You make me drop whole thing, too! Go vay or I call soldiers and tall tham shoot you all over—oop!—down!" He started toward the door. "Terrible gor!"

"Hold it, Cecil," Toffee said. "You touch that door and I'll pull off a shindig that'll make you sad all over."

The Leader stopped and regarded her uncertainly. "You American vooman spy, hah?" he demanded. "You think you smart. Vell, you be dad soon, what you think, hay?"

"I think you're going to be reasonable and do what I say, hey," Toffee answered firmly. "Either that or you're going to get the surprise of your life."

"Who iss you anyway?"

"An avenging angel," Toffee said. "That'll do for now."

"Nonsanse!" the Leader snorted. "No soch thing angel. Anyvay, angel vould not say dorthy vords, make soldiers drop things."

"Okay," Toffee said, "so I'm no angel. You're right there, pop. But I'm avenging, and don't you forget it."

A new thought crossed the seething mind of the Leader. "You know who you talk to so mean?"

"Sure, Mac," Toffee said. "I know you."

"Than I tall you drop dad, you gotta do it, hah?"

"Huh-uh," Toffee said, shaking her head. "And let's have no more sass about killing people. Now let's get down to brass doorpulls . . ."

But just at that moment the soldiers outside not only got down to doorpulls, but pulled them: the room began to swarm.

"If I'd knew you were coming," Toffee said, "I'd have baked a snake." Nevertheless, she retreated warily. The guards paused uncertainly before her and started babbling among themselves.

"Now!" the Leader said triumphantly.

But Toffee pointed imperiously to the gabby guards. "What are those birds saying about me?" she demanded. "I've got a right to know."

The Leader paused to listen, then nodded with comprehension.

"Forst man say he think you foreign spy because you look nothing like voomans from this country. Other man say he's right because if you var from here you

would haf thick lags like his wife who iss von big slob. Forst man say he can say that again for his wife who iss so big slob you gotta say it twice to describe her." The Leader paused to consider this exchange and suddenly smote his brow. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "Now iss clear! You degenerate product of America sant har to make men unrastful with slobbish female population. So!"

"It's a side-line I hadn't thought of," Toffee said and smiled engagingly at the guards. "But if you think it'll work."

"Iss no good you viggie around and look saxy," the Leader put in sullenly. "You gonna get shot good, you degenerate boopsy daisy." He turned to the guards and shouted an order which had but one meaning in any language. The men instantly formed a single rank with mechanical precision and raised their rifles toward Toffee, albeit with a certain gleam of reluctance in their eyes.

"Now you gonna gat it," the Leader said.

But Toffee only smiled. "I've told you," she said, "Im an avenging angel. And we angels are practically indestructible."

"Ve see," the Leader snorted. "So!" He turned to the guards and barked an order that touched off a confusion of explosion and gun smoke. In the moment that ensued, as the smoke settled, there was a tense silence. This was followed by

a many-throated cry of alarm.

Toffee, still smiling, and completely unscathed, stepped lightly through the screen of smoke and presented herself to the company at large.

"What would you like for an encore?" she asked.

She did not bother, of course, to explain that she could not possibly be destroyed as long as Marc's mind held the image of her as a live being. She would always be just as Marc imagined her and he quite evidently was not thinking of her as dead at the moment.

AS she moved forward, the guards took a faltering step backwards. Then, as a man, they turned and fled the room, slamming the door after them.

Toffee shrugged lightly, turned and gazed about. The Leader was no longer in evidence. She paused to consider briefly, then crossed to the large desk in the center of the room, and bent down to peer underneath.

"You may as well come out," she said. "I see you."

The Leader's head appeared apprehensively in the opening. "Go vay," he said. "Vhy you not dad? You crazy?"

"Crawl out of there, Sam," Toffee commanded. "Loosen that tight collar of yours and get set for a lesson in future history. You can frolic about on the floor later."

Slowly the great man emerged and stood before her. Toffee's refusal to die or even get decently dented had shaken him to the very foundations. Furtively he eyed the bullet-scarred wall.

"Shame," Toffee said. "You've been naughty, Jasper. Sit down."

He did as he was told, looking as though he might burst into tears at any moment. "Vhy you not dad lak hangnail?" he insisted. "You got on iron gordle?"

"I simply can't be killed," Toffee said. "I just can't seem to bring myself around to a serious frame of mind about guns and knives and that sort of trash. Which leads me to the problem at hand. I've got a plan for you, kiddo, and though it won't take five years, we've got to shake a leg." She glanced at the row of buttons and the speaker on the desk. "You know what you're going to do?"

"No," the Leader said warily. "Vhat?"

"You're going to start pressing those buttons, one at a time, from right to left. You're going to talk to all the big shots wired to those buttons and you're going to order the country demobilized, tonight."

"Mah?" the Leader said. "And since when?"

"Right now," Toffee said. "You are going to have every bomb and every facility for making bombs blown to dust in the cool of the night. Every piece of live ammuni-

tion in the country is going to be laid to rest. By your order. So get busy and start having the danger areas cleared."

The Leader only stared at her in blinking disbelief.

"Voop!" he burped with deep emotion.

"And what is the meaning of that remark?" Toffee asked.

"Means you iss goofy. Means you got bats in the bonnet."

"And you're going to have ants in the pants if you don't start pressing your moist little finger to those buttons." Toffee eyed him humorlessly. "Are you going to start pressing or aren't you? You've had the word."

"I'm waste no more time talking foolish with dorthy, saxy dame like you," the Leader said petulantly. He got up and started determinedly toward the door. "I call new guards and have them carry you away."

"I warned you," Toffee said, raising her hand tentatively. "You'll regret it."

BUT the Leader, unintimidated, continued toward the door. He had just reached out to open it when Toffee brought her hand down quickly over the face of the ring. Events proceeded according to expectations.

"Halpovitch!" the Leader screamed, and plumped down heavily on the floor. "Oi!" Following the pattern of his forerunners he slapped

his hands to his bottom and hugged himself into a knot of pulsating agony. A stream of highly charged verbiage sullied the air.

"You kick me in restricted, top secret area!" he wailed.

"Not exactly," Toffee said. "Though it's a shame. So many people have longed to." She moved closer to her distressed victim. "Going to start punching buttons? If you do I'll take the heat off."

"No!" the Leader gritted pettishly. "I ponce you in nose!"

"I see," Toffee said. "Suppose I call those guards back in here and let them see you like this? In no time at all the news will get around that the Great Leader has gone off his rocker and is snapping at his own bottom like a beagle after ham hock. A fine laughing stock you'll make, won't you?"

"No!" the Leader pleaded. "No! Oh, such a pain!"

"Then suppose we have a little friendly cooperation around here?"

"Hokay!" the Leader cried. "I can't stand it no longer!"

Toffee made a pass at the ring and the Leader, after a moment of adjustment, arose.

"How you do such rotten thing?" he asked.

"You haven't got all the secret weapons," Toffee said. "That's one your agents missed. Now hop to it and start thumbing those discs."

Shaking his head which was heavy with disillusion, the Leader

made his way shakily to the desk. He looked at Toffee, then reached for the first of the buttons.

"Don't double cross me," Toffee said, raising her hand. "If you do you'll writhe in agony for the rest of your days."

"Hokay," the Leader said and pressed the button. A moment later a voice answered distantly.

"Hlopovitch!" the Leader yelled at the top of his lungs. Instantly Toffee made the necessary gesture, and for the second time the great man assumed the position, placing his equipment as he went. He was moaning low in every sense of the word.

"I warned you," Toffee said. "Trickery will get you nothing but a pain in the terminus."

"All right!" the Leader groaned. "Stop it! I poosh buttons! I poosh 'em twice apiece! I do what you say like a liddle lamb."

Toffee manipulated the ring, and again the Leader picked himself up from the floor. "Let's stop this horseplay," she said, "and get going."

"Horseplay!" the Leader exclaimed, advancing his finger to the buttons. "Horses what play mean like you should be on the backs of postage stamps."

IT was nearly an hour later when the Leader released the last button and sagged back in his chair, a broken man.

"Iss all," he said. "You have louse up everything. They all say I am insane, but they gonna do it anyhow 'cause I tell 'em, the dumb-bells. Over-regimented, they are, like a lot of stupid machines."

Toffee glanced out the window at the now-darkened square. "The fireworks should be starting soon, if they're as efficient as you say." She turned back to the Leader. "Is there any way to get to the top of this pile of concrete where we'll have a better view?"

"Opp stairs, sure," the Leader said dully. "Who wants to see?"

"Come on," Toffee said. "This is going to be *worth* seeing, all that advanced gun powder going up in smoke."

"Hokay," the Leader agreed brokenly. "Who cares now?"

Toffee watched him carefully as he opened a drawer in the desk and slid his hand inside. It was a moment before he extracted a large bottle of vodka.

"For the medicinal purposes only," he explained ruefully. "And I am the sick buckeroo of them all."

Toffee smiled. "Let's get to the top, pop," she said amiably. "Let's tie one on."

THOUGH it occurred miles away, the explosion shook even the solid foundations of the capitol building. Toffee and the leader watched with awe as the whole world, it seemed, suddenly screamed

with white fire. The Leader was forced to cling to Toffee for support, and Toffee clung to the bottle strictly as a precaution.

"Beautiful," Toffee breathed as the building ceased to shudder. "It's beautiful to see all that death and destruction destroying itself. Makes you think of those scorpions who sting themselves in the neck when they're mad."

And if the explosions constituted an item of beauty for Toffee, the night was filled to overflowing with the gaudy stuff. The explosions, near and far, continued through the night. Toffee and the despairing Leader sat on the edge of a functional parapet and toasted each new blast with vodka and conflicting emotions.

Below them people churned bewilderedly in the streets like a rising and falling tide. A faint thread of dawn touched the horizon just as the last explosion shuddered across the land.

"Iss all," the Leader mourned soddently. "All iss gone. You haf made me a tired old man."

"That's all you ever were," Toffee said almost kindly. "You were foolish to try to be anything else." She patted him on the head with groggy sympathy. "I've got a feeling I've got to be running along now. But there's just one more thing before I go . . ."

"Iss all. Iss all," the Leader moaned. "Iss no more."

"No, not that. All I want to know is what does helpovitch mean?"

The old man lolled his head to one side and looked at her lopsidedly from the corner of his eye. "Iss native slang vord meaning 'democracy.' Iss very dorty vord."

And then, as his beautiful tormentor vanished into thin air, he toppled from his perch on the wall and sprawled flat on his back.

The enemy, a bottle cradled protectively in his arms, had fallen . . .

MARC had fought the battle against sleep to the last ditch, and there had tripped and fallen squarely into the waiting arms of Morpheus. The sounds, the drone and buzz of Congress, swirled away into limbo and mercifully died. Marc was no longer among those present at the ridiculous investigation.

The only way Marc had been able to go to sleep the previous night was to take as many sleeping tablets as possible, and then a couple more. When Congressman Bloodsop had managed finally to awaken him and to tell him of Toffee's disappearance, it was a long while before he was able to appraise the situation rightly; that Toffee had simply transferred her activities to some other seat of operations, so to speak. Then, once this had soaked into his benumbed brain, it occurred to him that it constituted an

ideal state of affairs. With the volatile redhead out of the picture there was an even chance that he would be able to extricate himself from the mess she had created for him and find his way back to Julie.

To accomplish this end he had only to stay awake so that Toffee could not put in an untimely appearance—no mean accomplishment considering the sleeping tablets fermenting in his system. Now he contributed to the congressional activities with a resonant snore.

"And do you persist, Mr. Pillsworth, in the absurd assertion that you did not aid in the escape of the young woman known as Toffee? *Mr. Pillsworth!*"

Marc stirred and opened his eyes as his name penetrated his awareness.

"Eh?" he yawned, then sat up abruptly as a current of horror flashed up his spine. What chilled him more than the reproving tone and the baleful eye was the realization that he had been asleep. He glanced away from the fuming chairman and subjected the room to a wary search. It was on the return sweep that his most awful expectations burst abloom. Toffee, looking for all the world like an abandoned torch singer on the corner of a piano, was sitting on the outer edge of the podium, one hand poised rakishly on a well-curved hip. She surveyed the assemblage with

unmistakable disappointment. Throughout the room several hot games of tick-tack-toe were summarily abandoned as grey, greying, bald and balding heads snapped back in uncharacteristic attitudes of attention. The members of Congress, acting sharply against precedent, sat up and took note of the business at hand.

SINCE no one else spoke, Toffee took the initiative. "So this is a body of men, is it?" she sneered. "I've seen better bodies on Model T's."

The Chair eyed her with a definite lack of warmth.

"My dear young woman," the Chair said, glaring coldly through his glasses. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm here to be investigated," Toffee said, jauntily crossing her legs. "Get out the tape measure and heave to."

Marc pressed his hands to his temples and sank lower in his seat.

"What!" the Chair said. "You're the young woman known as Toffee?"

"The same," Toffee said complacently. "The very same."

"How did you get there on the stand all of a sudden?"

"Ask me no questions," Toffee said, "and you'll reduce the lie expectancy by at least fifty percent."

Marc's forlorn moan was lost as Chair cleared his throat. He

flicked a pencil in Marc's direction. "Take your place over there with your confederate, please."

"Sure," Toffee said. Abandoning her perch, she leaped lightly to the floor and shoved off in Marc's direction, pausing on the way to pat Congressman Bloodsop on the head. The congressman winked at her, withdrew the pocket flask which had been affixed to his mouth and wiped his lips genteelly on the back of his hand.

"Government," Toffee observed, settling herself happily at Marc's side, "is much the same the world over—full of medicinal purposes."

"Why did you have to show up now?" Marc asked sourly. "They'd have called the whole thing off in another few minutes."

"That's what I like," Toffee said, patting his hand, "a rousing welcome from the one you left behind."

Marc withdrew his hand frigidly and resisted a yawn. "Now we're right back in the same old soup."

Toffee scanned the Congress with a sweeping glance. "Don't tell me you're afraid of this collection of old nincompoops?" she scoffed.

She pointed to a bemused, bald-pated individual across the way who was engaged to the last nerve in the business of engraving a pierced heart in the top of the table in front of him. Across from this exhibit sat a lank citizen who was quietly strumming a guitar and chanting a ballad which had to do with

a lonesome cowboy whose horse was dead, house was burned, well was dry, range was barren, and he himself was suffering from pernicious anemia—which individual, nonetheless, wished to assure his faithless sweetheart that she was not to worry for a minute that his affairs were anything other than tickety-boo and that he would 'git' along somehow.

MARC observed these examples of high-minds-at-work with a wry face. "That's just the trouble," he grieved, "they're completely irrational. Heaven knows what they might take a fancy to do to us. Your entrance didn't help any, you know."

"Nonsense," Toffee said. "They're just a bunch of harmless children."

"So harmless," Marc snorted, "they've danced the whole nation right down the path to extinction."

"Oh, that," Toffee said, smiling secretively. "I wouldn't worry about that. I wouldn't waste the time."

"Oh, you wouldn't, wouldn't you?" Marc said annoyedly. "Well, let me remind you, Miss Cotton Brain, that you're subject to the laws of extinction just as much as the rest of us. When I die you go with me, you know, and after the way you've messed up my final hours I will consider it a pleasure to perish just to get even with you. I will laugh as the bombs come crashing down on my roof."

"You're doing me a terrible in-

justice," Toffee said.

At this point their conversation was abruptly concluded by a heavy rapping from the Chair.

"The Chair addresses the young woman known as Toffee."

"If I'm known as Toffee," Toffee snapped, "then call me Toffee. Stop making me sound like some loose-moraled hussy slinging her hips around in a Klondike saloon."

"Just remain seated," the Chair said severely, "and speak into the microphone on the table. There are some questions for you to answer before we proceed."

Toffee eyed the Chair with raised eyebrows. "Okay," she said. "Shoot." She turned to Marc. "Stop nudging me."

"First of all," the Chair said. "Please make a statement of your political affiliations."

"Political affiliations?" Toffee said, completely bewildered. "If you mean have I ever had anything to do with politicians, I haven't. I might as well say that I think all politicians are a bunch of bums." She turned again to Marc. "Are you ill, dear? Why are you making that awful choking noise?"

Marc repeated the awful choking noise, and the Chair rattled for attention. The Chair also glowered through its glasses.

"What the committee wants to know is which political philosophy do you embrace?"

"None of them," Toffee said. "I

wouldn't touch any of them with a pole, much less clasp them to my bosom as you suggest. Aren't you talking a little lewd with all this talk about embracing?"

"Let's put it another way," the Chair said with strained patience. "Of which nation are you a citizen?"

"Why, none of them, of course," Toffee said. "Not that they wouldn't have me, you understand . . ."

PRECISELY at this point a door behind the Chair burst open, and a small, musty individual in shirt sleeves hurled himself into the room.

"It's come!" he piped. "It's come!"

"Has someone been praying for rain?" Toffee asked innocently.

The Chair rattled frenziedly. "Just what is it that's important enough to justify this outburst?"

"The news!" the little man jibbered. "I was working down in the Intelligence Department just now . . ."

"I wondered where they keep all the intelligence around here," Toffee said. "I didn't know they had a department for it."

"Shut up, can't you?" Marc hissed. "You've made enough enemies already to last us out a lifetime."

"You Know Where!" the little man screeched. "You Know Where!"

A murmur of apprehension moved

through the room.

"They've attacked?" the Chair asked quickly. "Has the attack begun? Speak up, man!" Then without waiting for a reply, he turned to the gathering at large. "I will now lead you all in prayer."

"No!" the little man cried. "No, no!"

"You don't want us to pray, you nasty little atheist?"

"No!" the little man cried. "Yes! I don't care! But there isn't any attack! There isn't going to *be* one! You Know Where was demobilized last night. It's a positive miracle! Our agents report rumors about a religious revival going on there. Everyone is talking about an angel with red hair who appeared to the Leader and . . ."

Marc turned sharply to Toffee with the look of a man who has just been stung by a bee.

"You . . . !"

"Uh-huh," Toffee said. "We had quite a romp last night, the Leader and I." She spoke through a pandemonium of cheering, crashing bottles and mad guitar music.

"Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie!" the lanky Congressman chortled besottedly. "Where the coyotes howl 'cause there's no whisk-ee!"

The Chair added to the din in behalf of a moment of silence and received just a moment.

"Let's knock off for the day," a voice yelled, "and get drunk!"

"We did that yesterday," the Chair said. "We have to think of appearances once in a while, you know. Besides, this new development puts a whole new face on things. It calls for action."

"What about me?" Toffee yelled. "I insist on being investigated."

"Please be quiet, young woman," the Chair said. "You're no longer needed here."

"Thank heavens!" Marc sighed. "Come on, let's leave."

"Certainly not," Toffee said. "I have other business to take care of."

"Oh, no!" Marc cried, and slumped exhaustedly into his chair. "I'm too tired for any more!"

"We must realize," the Chair was saying, "that an opportunity has been placed in our hands. The enemy is helpless. *Now is the time to strike!*"

THERE was a pause while this sank in, and then the cheering and rough-housing began again with greater vigor.

"Rickety - rax!" One vaporish congressman giggled, slipping limply from his chair to the floor. "Rickety-rax! Give 'em the axe!"

A colleague at his right launched a squadron of paper darts into the air as the guitarist twanged away at an off-key rendition of the *Air Corps Song*. This musical interlude, however, came to an unhappy end as the gentleman across the table,

finishing the pierced heart with a flourish, picked up an inkwell and emptied it into the bowels of the instrument. There was a splintering crash as the donner received his contribution, guitar and all, across the crown of his head. Undaunted, the man rose from his seat and launched into a lamentable imitation of Jolson doing a mammy song.

"We'll kill 'em!" the cry went up. "We'll give it to 'em in the teeth, the dirty, yella, murderin' rats!"

"Gentlemen!" the Chair pleaded. "Gentlemen! Your enthusiasm and patriotic spirit is commendable. But let's be constructive about this thing. *Let's declare war!*"

Toffee and Marc, who had been watching this display with rising emotion, got to their feet simultaneously.

"Now just a minute!" Toffee yelled. "Just a minute, you tramps!"

"Precisely," Marc said, steady-ing himself against the table. "Just a minute."

But their protest was unheard in the din of the merry-making.

"I can see," Toffee said, lifting her hand, "that the time is due to take measures."

"For once," Marc said, "I'm with you one hundred percent." He moved to her side in a limp gesture of staunch support, blinking drowsily.

Toffee eyed the revelling law makers with a selective eye. Her

gaze fell to two rotund parties who, their arms clasped about each other's shoulders, were dancing a polka in the aisle. As one of the bulbous rears swiveled in her direction, she let go. It was a direct hit on the target.

With a searing cry the erstwhile dancer unclasped his partner and doubled over, his chops aquiver with an emotion too great for expression.

His partner, at first taken aback, eyed this inexplicable development with bleary gloom. Then he beamed with happy understanding.

"Leap frog!" he yelled joyously. "Hey, fellas! Leap frog!"

THE rush for the aisle was instantaneous and enthusiastic. As the playful congressmen lined up for the game, Toffee leaped to the top of the table and assumed a firing stance. Taking careful aim as the first gamester wheezed up the aisle and boosted himself aloft over the back of his suffering brother, she executed a neat wing shot which dropped her victim into place with a convulsion of shocked pain.

"Fish in a barrel," Toffee said gleefully.

"Good," Marc said, coming momentarily awake. "There! Get that gaffer on the rise!"

And another congressman doubled in mid-air and came to earth with a rasp on his lips.

"Stacking up nicely, eh?" Toffee

said. "Makes a neat exhibit, all of them in a row like that."

The sport continued apace. It wasn't long before the aisle was lined from end to end with tortured congressmen who moaned and wailed like lost souls taking hell's post grad course. Texas, naturally, made the loudest noise.

"Here, now!" he blurted. "What's going on here? What do you fellows think you're doing; you look like a lot of distressed cats who've found cement in the sand box. It doesn't look at all nice. I'm surprised at you, Maine, for being mixed up in this sort of thing. You, too, South Dakota. Young woman, why are you standing on that table?"

"When I go to the circus," Toffee said. "I like to see everything. I wouldn't want to miss this for the world."

"I thought I told you to go home. The Congress has finished with you."

"But have I finished with the Congress?" Toffee said. "That's what I ask myself."

"Get out!" the Chair cried, definitely beginning to show cracks about the outer surface. "Please go home. Please!"

"I'm afraid I can't," Toffee said. She nodded significantly toward the convulsed members. "I'd hate to go and leave so much unfinished business behind. Or should I say so

much behind, unfinished business?"

"Do you mean to say that you are in some way responsible for that repellent demonstration in the aisle?"

"I take the credit proudly," Toffee said. "Remember, I said I had a secret weapon? However, I must say that Mr. Pillsworth, here, has given me all sorts of moral support."

"Thank you," Marc said with composure. "Glad to be associated with any enterprise of a worthwhile nature. I'm a real sucker for these toney clambakes."

"Toney!" The Chair snorted in outrage. "I suppose you are able to undo this disgraceful state of affairs?"

"Oh, quite," Toffee smiled. "In a twinkling. But I wonder if I really want to."

"You must," the Chair said distractedly. "With all that moaning and groaning going on down there I can't hear myself think."

"Heaven only knows why you should want to," Marc said, "with your dwarfed powers of reasoning."

"**Q**UIET!" the Chair snapped. "Young lady, I'm telling you to release those men from whatever unattractive thing is ailing them. That's a congressional order!"

"Okay," Toffee said. "But with one stipulation."

"And what is that, may I ask?"

"That you follow the example of

You Know Where--and follow it to the last bomb and factory."

"What! Are you actually suggesting that we demobilize the country?"

"I'm telling you now," Toffee said earnestly. "And I'm telling you to do it immediately. Get religion, brother."

"I see," the Chair said quietly. His hand moved cautiously toward an alarm button.

"I'm sorry," Toffee murmured, "but I haven't time to waste on any more guards." She lifted her hand, made the necessary motion, and the Chair departed his moorings with a leap that sent his glasses sailing off into the air.

"Murder!" he screamed, and crashed back into his seat in a fit of acute discomfort.

"Well," Marc sighed. "Fair's fair. These boys have been giving everyone else that localized pain for years. Now they're just getting a shot of their own medicine. By the way, what happened to that little man from Intelligence?"

"He's in with the congressmen," Toffee said.

Dusting her hands lightly, she turned away just in time to see a door swing open to permit the pompous entrance of several over-costumed and over-decorated individuals who had obviously played the army and navy game with the right set of loaded dice.

One, however, stood ahead of and

apart from the others. He glittered and shone with all the bogus brilliance of a dime store jewelry counter. From the peak of his duck-tailed blonde hair to the tips of his two-toned shoes — passing quickly over his rust-red jacket and lemon yellow trousers—he was the absolute end and final gasp in well-upholstered commercial entertainers. As he stood impressively in the doorway his shirt front added the final touch of elegance by lighting up with the classical quote: Kiss Me Quick!

"Good night!" Marc said. "President Flemm! And the heads of the War Department!"

AS Toffee gazed on this fine new catch, whole vistas of fresh achievement spread themselves before her. "Hail! Hail!" she said. "Deck the halls with poison ivy!"

The President, having had his little joke, had since fallen into a mood for a bit of tribute from what he considered his official flunkies—or straight men. As he waited for the Congress to rise in his honor—without result—an expression of petulance swept over his features. It wasn't as though they weren't aware of his presence; he made himself known surely. Then why didn't the clods snap into it?

He stepped imperiously to the head of the aisle, from whence there issued low sounds of displeasure and suddenly, with a start, found him-

self faced with a shattering view of a whole row of upturned bottoms.

"Here, now!" he exclaimed. "What sort of greeting is this? If you men have some personal criticism to make against me there must be a nicer way of expressing it!" He swung about to the Chair. "Just who is responsible for this insulting . . .!"

The words jammed together in his throat at the sight of the Chair whose sightless eyes peered down at him with every evidence of complete loathing. He seemed to snarl. In fact, as the President watched, the Chair actually did bare his fangs and snarl.

"Now, just a minute!" the President cried, taken aback. "Maybe we do have our little differences now and again, but there's no need to get obstreperous about it. Now stop slavering at the mouth in that extraordinary way and tell those old fools in the aisle to turn around right end up."

The Chair only snarled again.

"Oh, very well," the President said coolly. "If that's the attitude you want to take . . ."

"I don't think you're really going to get anywhere with him," Toffee put in mildly.

The President whirled about. "And who are you?"

"You might say I'm in charge here," Toffee said. "My friend and I. I think you'll discover that the

Congress is suffering from sock—in a way." She nodded to the Chair. "With that one, it's something I said." The big brass crowded in curiously from the rear and ogled Toffee with enormous appreciation. "Oddly, you are just the group I've been waiting to see. I've been wanting to tell you that the time has come for you to demobilize the nation—unload all that high-powered ammunition before it goes off and hurts someone."

The President merely stared at her for a moment. Then he shook his head. "Wouldn't get a big enough laugh," he said.

"I take it you are replying in the negative?" Toffee asked.

"You got it, sis," the President said with his customary dignity. "Besides, just where do you get off telling me the time? Who signed you up for the act?"

"Allow me to present my credentials," Toffee said, and raised her hand. "You'll get a kick out of this."

A moment later President Flemm, quite to his own surprise, added acrobatic dancing to his list of talents. Toffee, aware that important persons required her best efforts, added a shot to the President's neck, having already administered to the more logical location.

President Flemm's fine tenor assailed the air with ear-splitting clarity, as his companions edged away

in terror. Clutching alternately at his neck and his rear, the man leaped about like a fan dancer deprived of her feathers before a meeting of young business executives. The President gave the performance of a man who was torn in his very soul.

"Think that'll get a laugh?" Toffee asked. And then, lest the President desired companions, she quickly added the efforts of the War Department. The effect was engaging in a primitive sort of way, though there was a great deal of clanking and crashing of brass on brass.

"Any time you gentlemen decide to sit one out," Toffee said, "just let me know. There are plenty of telephones handy with which to spread the good news."

She and Marc retreated to the steps in front of the podium, picking up an abandoned bottle on the way. Toffee settled back comfortably and indulged in a long draft.

"Hey," Marc said, "you might leave a swallow for me. I'm the one who needs the stimulant, you know."

Toffee handed him the bottle, and for a moment they sat silent listening dreamily to the sounds of gnashing teeth and grunted curses that filled the air about them. Marc looked over to where the President and his cronies had fallen into a stupor of misery.

"Looks like the government has collapsed," he observed drowsily.

"I might say it has a pain in its bones."

Even as he spoke, the President lifted an enfeebled hand and beckoned to them. "I think the President wishes a word with us."

"Isn't it thrilling," Toffee said, "meeting all these important people on such intimate terms?" She tilted the bottle again. "Let's toddle over and see what the old comic wants."

"This is excruciating!" the President panted as they approached. "You've got to stop it; it's unbearable."

"Now you know how people felt about your jokes," Toffee said. "I take it you're on the verge of capitulation?"

"Over the verge," the President grunted weakly. "Huh, fellas?"

FOUR sets of clenched teeth bobbed up and down behind him, accompanied by the plaintive rattle of metal.

"Good show, men," Toffee said. "That's using the old heads. Follow me to the telephones the best way you can and start the wires singing—my tune, of course."

Half an hour later Toffee and Marc let themselves out of the room by the back way and walked along the corridor toward the street.

"I'm hungry as an abandoned babe," Toffee said.

Marc regarded her from beneath drooping eyelids. "I don't know if

I can stay awake long enough to feed you," he said. Then he stopped and nodded worriedly back the way they'd come. "Are you sure you ought to leave them all groaning around in there like that?"

"Until after the fireworks to-night," Toffee said. "When it comes to backing out on your word those boys could face to the rear and win the Olympic races without straining a nerve. Besides, suffering has a cleansing effect on the soul, they tell me, and that mob in there has the grimeiest set of souls I've ever seen. I informed the lot of them that if they welched on this deal they'd stay that way the rest of their lives and would have to be buried in round coffins. We can come back and turn them loose later."

"I suppose you're right," Marc said. "Right now, I've got to have a pot of coffee before I pass out."

By now they had reached the sidewalk and luckily spotted a cab. Waving for the driver's attention, they hurried forward.

It was just as Marc reached for the door of the cab that he suddenly stumbled. All at once his weariness became too great to be borne further; it reached to his very bones and turned them to sawdust. As he went down to his knees the blackness swam in around him. He reached out a hand to steady himself, but there was nothing to cling

to. He was vaguely aware of falling . . .

* * *

"Well, now, how'd you like a dame like that!" the cab driver exclaimed, climbing out of the car. "She takes a powder just because the guy gets a snootful and passes out!" He looked down at Marc who, sprawled on the sidewalk, was tuning up for a good solid snore. "I wonder where he belongs?"

WHEREVER he belonged, Marc at that very moment was lounging in a state of quiet bliss on one of the rising slopes in the valley of his mind. He turned to regard Toffee whose costume had once again become the transparent tunic, and to reflect that Paris would have to go a long way to stitch up anything half as becoming. Toffee smiled back at him and propped herself up lazily on one elbow.

"Well," she said. "It was something of a whirl, wasn't it? I mean it leaves one a trifle dizzy."

"Whirl?" Marc asked. "How do you mean?" Recent events had slipped from his mind in the interval between awareness and slumber.

"The bombs," Toffee said. "The politicians—" she held up her hand and displayed the ring "—and this."

Memory jarred back into place. "Oh, my gosh!" Marc cried. "All those congressmen! And the Presi-

dent! They're all back there . . . ! And you're here . . . ! How'd you ever get them straightened out?"

Toffee laughed. "I won't. There's going to be a terrific run on the Washington doctors for a while, that's all. Anyway, it'll do the old tubs good, give them something to think about next time they start getting gay with the public's time—and redheaded women."

"Anyway," Marc said. "At least it proves that a well-placed jolt in the right place is a lot more powerful than any bomb. I was right in the first place. When warfare gets personal it loses its attraction. I suppose they'll be busy developing more and worse bombs as soon as the shock wears off, but at least the people in the world will have another chance to try and prevent them."

Toffee shrugged lightly. "It just goes to show that world politics are really childishly simple when someone comes along with a firm hand."

"Are you going to keep the ring?" Marc asked.

Toffee shook her head. "I think I'll just dematerialize it; I never did care about gems." She regarded him slowly from the corner of her eye. "I have just one last use for it first."

"Yes?" Marc asked with a note of apprehension. "What's that?"

"Just this," Toffee said. She slid her arms around his neck and drew

him close. "One twitch of resistance and I'll double you up like a pretzel."

Marc sighed helplessly. "When you put it that way, what can I do?" he asked, and submitted unflinchingly to her kiss.

It was just as she drew away, just as she brushed her hand over his shoulder, that the ring exploded.

Actually it was only a burst of vibrant green light, but it was so intense that it blinded Marc, blocking Toffee and the valley from sight. Marc squinted against the brilliance and waited for it to die. But when it did there was only an infinite blackness where it had been.

"Toffee?" Marc called tentatively. "Toffee, where are you?"

"Goodbye, Marc," Toffee's voice said through the darkness. "Goodbye, you old reprobate."

MARC moved a bit to one side and felt of the softness beneath him before he opened his eyes. Then he opened them half-fearfully, wondering where he was. He looked about slowly, then suddenly sat upright. He was home, in his own room, in his own bed.

But it was dark outside, and the lamp was on. He had passed out on a street in Washington, if he remembered correctly. He was sure that was right, but he couldn't think how he had gotten home. Then he held his thoughts in abeyance and listened; there was the sound of a

voice—a man's voice—and it seemed to be coming from downstairs . . .

"As each bomb bursts and casts out its power for destruction the burden becomes just so much lighter in the hearts of men all over the world. Tonight the bombs send out their light against the darkness, not as instruments of death and hate, but as multi-beamed beacons pointing the way to world peace. This is one of the greatest nights in human history!"

Marc leaped from the bed, drew on his robe which was lying across the bed, and ran out into the hallway. He was nearly to the head of the stairs when he stopped to listen again.

"The mystery surrounding the House of Congress since early today when the order for demobilization was issued from there by the President remains unsolved. Guards have been placed by presidential order at all entrances and exits, and no one, not even the President, has left the inner chamber. The press and other officials have been strenuously barred from entry, even at gun point in some instances. However a number of physicians have received calls from within the chamber and have been escorted into the room. A rumor persists that one of the members—Congressman Wright of Maine—was stricken with the mumps during today's session, placing the entire Congress in quarantine . . ."

Marc hurried down the stairs and into the living room. He stopped short at the sight of her.

"Julie . . . !" he cried

SHE rose quickly from her chair and switched off the radio.

"I had it fixed," she said. "I was so ashamed." Then her face lighted with joy. "Oh, darling, there's the most wonderful, wonderful news! The President ordered . . . !"

"I know," Marc said. "I . . . uh . . . I heard it just now coming down the stairs." He went to her and drew her into his arms, and for a moment they were both still, just holding each other.

"Julie . . . ?" Marc said, and she nodded. "When did you come back?"

"The same night I left, of course," Julie smiled. "I only got as far as the station and I got to thinking that if anything happened . . . and we weren't together . . . Anyway,

I turned right around and came back. I was nearly frantic when you weren't here. I just sat here and cried and blamed myself."

"I see," Marc said. "And . . . uh . . . how did I get back?"

"The taxi driver brought you. He found your address in your wallet."

"All the way from Washington?"

"He said there was a young lady he wanted to see here anyway, and he only charged half fare." She put her hand to his cheek. "Oh, I was so relieved when I found out you'd only been on a bender. In fact I was a little flattered that you were that desperate without me." She drew closer. "Oh, darling, we both behaved so childish. We deserved just what we got—a good swift kick in the . . ."

But Marc kissed her quickly—and for a long time—until he was sure a new topic for conversation had come into her mind . . .

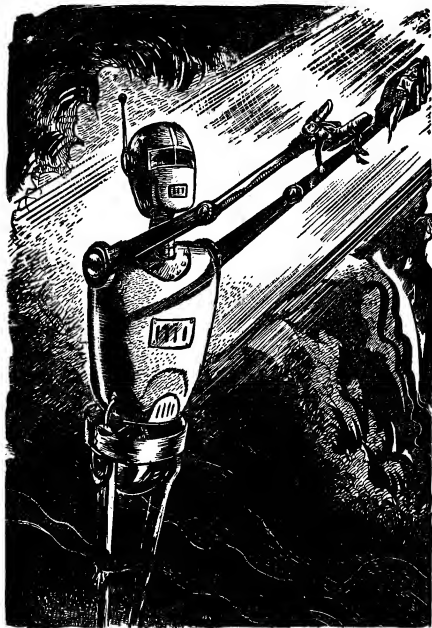
World Beyond

WHILE all of us who see, see the world in roughly the same colors unless we're color-blind, it is curiously interesting to know what someone else sees whose eyes have a greater range. Just as some people hear higher and lower tones than others, so there are a few who see color extremes greater than others.

Because color is such a personal subjective type of thing, it's hard to get into a mind to find out what it "sees." But scientific instruments

are enabling us to evaluate color (which is another way of describing the wave-length of light) more accurately. As a result, it is learned that where some people see definite events, others see nothing!

What a world of rich beauty must lie behind the wave-lengths not all of us see. Is there possibly a connection between an artist and his ability to see refinements in color denied the more prosaic of us? Do we see a flower or its shadow?





The **BUILDERS**

By
FOX B. HOLDEN

They rummaged in the ruins of Earth's cities, looking for plans to restore vital machinery. But what they finally constructed got up and ran away!

MARKTEN flew low over the sun-lit ruins, and wondered idly if he would find any more in them than he had found elsewhere on the planet.

"Looks as completely dead as all the rest," he said to his companion. "New City has a big enough population anyhow, as far as I'm concerned. Not that it's important, I suppose. There's always plenty of space in which to expand, but you know what I mean."

The younger occupant of the low-circling aircraft nodded his understanding. "There'd be enough room on either side of the Big Mountains to take care of millions more of us, I guess. But I think you're right. Anyway, there isn't another nomad or ruin-dweller on the planet. New City is as complete as it's going to be—and as you say, twelve million is enough. But do you think we'll find any more plans down there?"

"Hard to say," Markten answered, levelling off the aircraft for a landing. "But if there are traces of anything, I hope you'll keep your attention on what's of technical value and not waste time again on all that other stuff. None of us have ever bothered reading it—you can't build anything from it—no diagrams. To build is the only purpose of New City's civilization — how could anything else be of importance?"

"I've wondered off and on about that. But then, there is so little of anything left that it doesn't make much difference. Important thing is to find more diagrams."

"Glad you realize it. I've been a citizen of New City ever since the first few of us on this continent started building it forty years ago, and I can tell you, building things is all that's important. You'd realize that soon enough if you'd

wandered around, alone and useless, as I and a lot of other Elders did for years." Markten brought the fast, twin-engined aircraft in to a perfect landing, cut the power, and set the brakes. The two left their seats and started getting field equipment together.

"They told us at the academy that you Elders wandered so far and for so long that you had permanently lost all memory of the past. Is that really true, Markten?"

"It is, not that it ever mattered. We all had forgotten from where we'd come, or how we got where we were. I guess all we remembered was how to build. But then——"

"As you said, building is all there is that's important."

They left the plane and started in the direction of what once had obviously been a city. To Markten and his young aide the sight was nothing new; they had seen, as had all the other members of the Research Builders division, thousands of others just like the one toward which they were now walking. Sometimes Markten thought it would have been a lot easier to have signed up with the Production Builders division — but that would have been dull. Always searching for new plans; building something *new*—that was more to his taste.

THE only trouble was, there seemed to be fewer and fewer

new plans as the years went by. And now, even when you found some, you had to check its potentialities exhaustively before you started building it. Markten shuddered a little when he thought of some of the first things that had been built without preconstruction study for analysis as to its probable use. One of them would have blown New City off the face of the earth had it been put into operation in a metropolitan proving lab. Fortunately, the thing had been too big, and had been taken for trial to a lab located in a southern desert. Today, there was still a ten-mile wide crater in the sand where the thing had gone off.

Production never got that model from Research. There were some others of similar nature that they hadn't got, too . . .

That was why, these days, even if you dug something up, you were damn careful before you built it.

"Say, Markten!"

"Yes?"

"I was wondering about something. Eventually, we're bound to find all the plans there are. What happens when there aren't any more?"

"Maybe then there'll be time for that other stuff I caught you wasting time on in the ruin we were in last week!" There was a grin on Markten's thin face. "But not until!"

"No, seriously, Markten. The di-

vision academy instructors said there wasn't much left, and that was why we had to be especially well trained, to find what little more there is. But what after we do, and there just isn't anymore?"

"Just—build more of what we've got, of course. What else would there be to do?"

"Well—well, you must be right. But Production sure will be dull

THERE was only a thin edge of the sun still separating daylight from darkness as they forced entry into their tenth ruin, and Markten's tone was dejected.

"This," he said, "has been a day wasted, and there's little possibility that we'll come up with anything here. Better get out your night-lamp."

Markten's young assistant obeyed, and started working his way into one of the few still-standing corridors. He moved cautiously, remembering his training. When exploration of ruins of shattered masonry is indicated, guard against unnecessary vibrations . . . The ruins yielded nothing but broken stone and twisted steel. There could, of course, be an obscured entrance to some lower level—many amazing documents had been discovered in the almost untouched lower levels of what had seemed totally destroyed buildings when viewed only from the gutted streets. That was why it

took so long to search a city, even though there often seemed nothing left to search. There could always be some spot undetectable but intact . . .

When he found the opening that led downward, it was necessary to go through it and descend without contacting Markten. To shout would mean dangerous vibrations — and to go back could well mean hours of delay in rediscovering his find.

The night-lamp pushed relentlessly against the blackness that hung stagnant in the lower level, and picked out the stumbling blocks of debris which had to be moved as smoothly as their weights would permit. Some were larger than the young researcher himself, and he realized that the going would have been a lot better had he not rationalized about contacting Markten to make whatever finds there might be on his own.

There were many brick and girder-cluttered places that once had been rooms, but, like so many other shattered interiors he had examined, all but stone and steel had been disintegrated by the unthinkable shock-waves that must have accompanied what awful force it had been that had wreaked such havoc over the face of an entire globe. Objects made of less sturdy stuff had been literally torn molecule from molecule, atom from atom.

The chance of discovery of a

complete book had been computed as a near impossibility. The finding of a complete blueprint or set of diagrams was considered almost as hopeless. To find all the pieces of a plan which had merely been shattered was about the best that could be expected. And, for forty years, now, as Markten had said, it had been done by four million painstaking Research Builders. It was, in a way, amazing how so many thousands of different things had been built . . . ,

THE lamp's roving beam fingered something quickly, fell back into blackness, then was suddenly groping with the desperation of an almost uncontrolled excitement for what it touched and lost. It touched again . . .

Should he find Markten now? No, not yet! Perhaps what he saw would be nothing. Pinned beneath one of the most massive steel girders he had yet seen, they were —

Books! Four books!

Quickly, yet with his nervous system under a willed rigidity, he assembled the portable cutting torch and began freeing his one-in-a-million find from the great length of twisted steel which held it in a vice-like hold against an embedded section of stone flooring.

Minutes ticked away. More than sixty of them were gone before the books were in his hands at last. Did they hold any plans? Diagrams

never seen before by Research? The titles —

Carefully he deciphered them from the crushed covers.

"A History of the World: 1800-1962."

"The P-s-y-c-h-o-l-o-g-y of H-u-m-a-n Relations."

"The P-h-i-l-o-s-o-p-h-i-e-s of P-l-a-t-o, S-o-c-r-a-t-e-s, and A-r-i-s-t-o-t-l-e."

The fourth title he did not understand at all because he could not read it. He knew only one of its three words, and it made even less sense than the other titles. Quickly, he flipped through the volume for a possible hint of explanation, and there were —

Diagrams! —

Hundreds of them, and one especially beautiful one, larger than the rest — it was necessary to unfold it from the book — in color! It was obviously the only important one of the four books; the others, from what he could gather from their rather vague titles, had nothing to do with building anything — but this one, with diagrams, obviously did!

In a haste accompanied with what he knew to be too little caution, Markten's young aide hastened back the way he had come, sometimes stumbling in his anxiety to present his invaluable find to the Elder, once almost falling.

But it took only minutes until he found Markten, who was still

examining the ruin on its ground level, near the large opening through which they had entered.

"Markten! Look — "

There was an ominous rumbling sound, then a terrifying feeling of the vibration of disintegration.

THEY bolted for the opening even as the still-standing masonry which formed it began to topple. The rumbling increased to thunder-volume, and the earth outside the collapsing ruin quaked beneath their running feet. When they finally stopped at a safe distance, their night-lamps showed only a slowly rising cloud of pumice and dust.

"How often," Markten said, when it at last was over, "do you forget the fundamentals of your basic training?"

"I — "

"It's done now. But the contents of whatever lower levels there may have been are lost to us for good. Nothing could have survived that. And we have never built a digging machine. There probably was nothing, anyway, but next time — "

Then Markten saw the book in his aide's hand. The look of disappointment on his features changed suddenly to one of disbelief, then to amazement.

"At least I saved this! It has diagrams, Markten! The cave-in I caused destroyed three other books, but they had no drawings in them

at all. Here. See if you can understand the title."

"Let's get to the laboratory compartment of the plane, where we can see something! Great electrons, boy, what made you hold this back?"

Under the powerful lamps in the lab compartment of their aircraft, Markten and the finder of the book puzzled over the three words on its cover and fly-leaf.

"Perhaps, in one of the dictionaries at Research headquarters — "

"No, I don't think so," Markten mused. "We'll look when we get back, but I don't think so.. Hmm. Doesn't make much difference — it's the diagrams that are important. And the entire book isn't incomprehensible. Lot of chemical terms, some electrical. I'm convinced already that these diagrams constitute a structure of a purely electrochemical nature. Although something seems to be missing, and yet — "

"At the headquarters lab, we can do a lot better than we can here, Markten. Or we can hand it over right away to the Research Pre-Construction Study division — "

"Nothing doing! I hold a competence rating on that study business, young fellow! I'll study it for possible inherent dangers, exactly according to regulations. Myself! And then whatever it is, we'll build it!"

"But Markten, suppose — "

Markten had already seated him-

self at the controls of the craft, switched on the take-off lights and started the powerful engines. Above the roar of the engines as they warmed for take-off, Markten's assistant could still detect the undertones of excitement in the Elder's voice.

"It's something different — completely different that you've found! Not just an improved design or a variation such as we've had to be content with for the past five years . . . This is *new*! I'm positive of it!"

There was, of course, little sense in doubting the word of an Elder. That was a part of training. Another part which Markten's aide had not forgotten had also said, however, that there could always be danger in a too-cursory preconstruction study of any new discovery.

And then, of course, there were those other things he had read which Markten had said were such a complete waste of time

THEY began construction work from the large colored diagram less than a month after the book containing it had been discovered. The diagram itself, of course, had been enlarged to its full scale, as had other sectional diagrams that Markten said definitely were parts of the same thing, but drawn separately in the book to render greater detail.

Two things had almost stumped

the Elder completely, however, before he announced his preconstruction studies finished, and that he was prepared to begin actual construction. There were odors in the laboratory which his aide's nostrils had never experienced before. He wondered if they were as new to Markten.

"I admit," Markten said the day he began work in the two specially constructed, oblong vats filled with a fluid Markten called formaldehyde, "I am puzzled about the power source. Obviously a chain of electrochemical reactions, but stemming from *where* — that's what I've got to find out. Also, I've had to have another full-scale diagram drawn up. There was another colored one we missed — it was on a regular page. Have a look."

His aide's less-experienced eyes examined the second full-scale drawing Markten had made.

"It's — smaller. And — different, sort of. But yet it's the same. Maybe —"

"Maybe one is just an improved model over the other? One a later development, you think?"

"Why not?"

"That's what I've been wondering. But — no. My studies show that neither has any greater power potential, to any marked degree, that is, than the other. Both structures seem to have almost exactly the same electrochemical potential-

ities. But for some reason, just the same, they are *different*."

"The original designers leave no clue in the book?"

"No. Just formulae, and the usual stuff we find with diagrams."

"You know, Markten, I've often wondered about whoever it was —"

"There you go, forgetting one of the basics of training again! 'Of sole importance is the discovery itself; its origination is a thing of the past, and the past being dead, is therefore of no importance'."

"I remember. But you have confused me, Markten. With these two problems unresolved, can you at the same time pronounce construction a safe venture?"

"I can, because neither of the unknowns is relative to the power potential, which I have ascertained to the required tolerances. Neither of them are based on a framework of nuclear physics, anyway. And I have discovered no possibility of chemical reaction which would render anything than a slow oxidation process."

"Therefore, youngster, to solve for the two unknown quantities — power-source and construction-variation — we must build!"

Markten was an Elder, so the trace of excitement in his voice was excusable. His decision was not to be questioned. Yet —

"Markten, I have a peculiar feeling about this."

"A peculiar *what*?"

"Well, I —"

"Are you questioning my preconstruction study?" Markten's tone was suddenly flat, yet charged with authority.

"Of course not, sir."

"Here are untried, absolutely new diagrams. We must build. That is our purpose. Now, we will begin. The — larger one first, I think."

THEY labored on the project for three months. They finished the structure in the large vat first, and Markten left the job of completing the smaller one to his assistant while he drained the larger vat of its original fluid, dried the completed structure, and placed a series of L-type electrodes at various spots on its exterior.

"The smaller one came out to look quite a lot different, Markten. I'll have it ready for the first series of charges by the time you have that one going. I don't understand, however, what good the charges will do when there isn't any power source to activate."

"Making either of them work might be a problem, but somehow I don't think so," Markten replied. "The whole set-up, devoid of any central power unit as it seems to be, is designed in such a way that electrochemical reactions of some sort should take place with the first series of charges. A few rearrangements of electrodes might be neces-

sary . . . ”

During the next four hours, Markten's assistant worked with extra speed, so that he was able to have the smaller vat drained and the electrode placement diagramed for his own use.

“Through what process of logic,” he asked Markten as he neared his last set of adjustments, “did you make your decision concerning a primary charge for the inducement of the electrochemical reactions of which you spoke?”

“You may inscribe in your apprentice journal,” the Elder said, as he prepared a dynamo for use, “that insofar as the logic of the situation was concerned, I simply applied the physical truth that an object at rest tends to remain at rest until acted upon by some outside force. Since the objects in this case are ingredients of a chemical nature specifically constructed for electrical conduction, the only possible solution is to activate them through application of an electromotive force. If the logic has been faulty, of course,” Markten paused a moment, “then we will know that there has simply been an error in construction. However, we have been precise in every step. They will work.”

“What they will do, naturally, rests in theory. Something of an electrical nature, in accordance with your logic. Correct?”

“Precisely. And if I'm wrong, and they prove of no use at all —

we'll dismantle them and inform Research Library that any further such diagrams discovered are worthless.”

The assistant straightened from his work.

“Finished?” Markten asked.

“I am. You know, though, even though they aren't exactly the same, they have a peculiar similarity to — ”

“We built according to specifications. Ready?”

“Go ahead, Markten.”

MARKTEN first reduced the penetrating power of the laboratory operation-lamps to a subdued softness. The smooth metal walls of the rectangularly shaped laboratory seemed to melt away to nothingness, and most of the bluish light was focused on the contents of the two vats.

Markten pressed a control.

There was no sound as the electrical impulses surged through the structures they had made, and the silence itself seemed a part of their stillness. There was a faint odor now of ozone.

Markten glanced at dials.

“Try a temperature test; see if the materials are withstanding the amperage. I will cut the current at your signal.”

Markten's assistant obeyed.

“I don't understand,” he said. “At completion, they were room-temperature — 68.7 calibrations.

Now, exactly 98.6 calibrations, yet the resistance of their chemical constituents would not warrant — ”

“Any damage? Tissue-break-down?”

“None I can see. Markten! The big one moved!”

Then the smaller one moved, too.

Both of them sat up.

For the moment Markten and his aide looked only at each other, the younger of the two speechless, incredulity on his features. Markten smiled.

“I was not sure,” he said. “But, as you said, they do appear similar to us. They are chemical automata; I suspected, but of course could not be sure. Now, we must discover the exact power-source and, more importantly, the control-centers of the things. Then — ”

But on these counts, Markten was doomed to disappointment. Aside from his discovery that the things he had created would not function properly without ingesting large amounts of different types of vegetable and organic materials, and that they operated independently of any outside stimulus, he was able to discover nothing more. Except,

when at length he had concluded that neither of the things could be of any use to the populace of New City because they could be neither electrically or mechanically directed by any type of control yet built, he discovered that they actually resisted any attempts to dismantle them. They ran.

“Peculiar,” he said.

“Shall I pursue them?” his apprentice asked. “They appear to be heading in the direction of the grasslands to the north.”

“Never mind.” Markten sounded dejected. “They have a very low unit power potential. They could never do any harm to anything.”

“I wish we knew what those three words on the book meant. ‘Advanced H-u-m-a-n A-n-a-t-o-m-y.’”

“Nothing too important, really. Or we’d’ve known their meaning. Well, there will be other things to build, and we need energy. Let’s go to Maintenance and recharge our plates.”

“Good thought. I guess those things wouldn’t have been strong enough to build anything anyway. At any rate, they can’t be dangerous . . . ”

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WORLD OF THE MAD

By Poul Anderson

Langdon had found immortality on the planet Tanith. Naturally he wanted his wife to share it—if he could prevent her from going insane first . . .

HE walked slowly through the curling purple mists, feeling the ground roll and quiver under his feet, hearing the deep-voiced rumble of shifting strata far underground. There were voices in

the fog, singing in high unhuman tones, and no man had ever learned what it was that sang—for could the wind utter sounds so elfishly sweet, almost words that haunted you with half understanding of something you had forgotten and needed desperately to remember?

A face floated through the swirling mist. It was not human, but it was very beautiful, and it was blind. He looked away as it mouthed voiceless murmurs at him.

Somewhere a crystal tree was chiming, a delicate pizzicato of glass-like leaves vibrating against each other. The man listened to it and to the low muttering of the earth, for those at least were real and he was not at all sure whether the other things were there or not.

Even after two hundred years, he wasn't sure.

He went on through the mist. Flowers grew up around him, great fragile laceries of shining crystal-line petals that budded and bloomed and died even as he walked by. Some of them reached hungrily for him, but he sidestepped their grop-

*Illustrated by
Ramon Raymond*





ing mouths with the unthinking ease of long habit.

Compasses didn't work on Tanith, and only a few men could even operate a radio direction finder, but Langdon knew his way and walked steadily ahead. His sense of direction kept rotating crazily: it insisted he was going the wrong way, no, now the house lay over to the right—no, the left, and a few paces straight up . . . But by now he had compensated for that; he didn't need eyes or kinaesthetic sense to find his way home.

There was a new singing in the violet air. Langdon checked his stride with a sudden eerie prickling along his spine. The mist eddied about him, thick and blinding, but now the city was growing out of it; he saw the towers and streets and thronging airways come raggedly into being.

Suddenly he stood in the middle of the city. It was complete this time, not the few fragmentary glimpses he ordinarily had. The mist flowed through the ghostly spires and pylons but somehow he could see anyway, the city lay for kilometers around.

IT was not a human city. It lay under three hurtling moons, lit only by their brilliant silver. But it lived, it pulsed with life about him; the shining dwellers soared past and seemed to leave a trail of little sparks luminous against the night.

They were not men, the old folk of Tanith, but they were beautiful.

There was no sound. Langdon stood in a well of silence while the city lay around him, and he thought that perhaps he was the ghost, alone and excommunicated on a world which lay beyond even the dreams of man.

But that was nonsense, he thought, angry with himself. It was simply that temporal mirages transmitted only light, not sound. He was here, now, alive, and the city was dust these many million years.

Two dwellers flew past him, male and female with arms linked, laughing soundlessly into each other's golden eyes. The male's great glowing wings brushed through Langdon's body. He stood briefly in a shower of whirling light-motes — and they didn't heed him, they didn't know he was there. They were only for each other, those two, and he was a ghost out of an unreal and unthinkable remote future.

The mirage faded. Slowly, in bits and patches, it dissolved back into the purple fog. He was alone again.

He shivered, and hastened his steps homeward.

The mist began to break, raggedly, as he came out of the forest. He went by a lake of life with only a passing glance at the strangeness of the new shapes that seethed and bubbled, rose out of its slime and took shifting form and sank

back into chemical disintegration. There was always something new, grotesque and horrible and sometimes eerily lovely, to be seen at such a place, but spontaneous generation was an old story to Langdon by now. And Eileen was waiting.

He came out on the brow of a steep hill that slanted down into the little cuplike valley where he had his dwelling. The hills were blue around it, blue with grass that tomorrow might be gold or green or gray, and the sky was currently blood-red. A grove of feather-like trees hid the house, swaying where there was no wind and murmuring to each other in their own language, and a few winged things hovered darkly overhead. For a moment Langdon paused there, savoring the richness of it. This was *his* home.

His land. Back on Terra they had forgotten the fullness that came with belonging to the earth, but the men who colonized among the stars remembered. Looking back, Langdon thought that the real instability and alienness was in the Solar System. Men had no roots there, and it was a secret woe in them and made them feverish and restless, eager to taste from all cups but shuddering away from draining any one.

On Tanith, thought Langdon with a quiet sort of exultation, a man drank his cup to the bottom, and there were many cups—or, if only

one, it was never the same and could never be emptied.

For a man on Tanith did not grow old.

SUDDENLY he stiffened, and a psyche-feeder swooped low to absorb his furiously radiated nervous energy. The reaction of it died in his mind as a chilling fear. Angrily, without having to think about it, he drove the creature off with a jaggedly pulsed mental vibration and remained standing and listening.

Somone had screamed.

It came again, distorted by the wavering air, hardly recognizable to one who had not had time to adjust to Tanith, and it was Eileen's voice. "Joe, Joe, Joe—help —"

He ran, scrambling down the unstable hillside with his mist-wet cloak flapping behind him. A sword-plant slashed at him with its steely leaves. He swerved and went on down into the valley, running, leaping, a bounding black shadow against the burning sky.

Static electricity discharged in crackling blue sheets as he tore through the grove, hissing against his insulating clothes and stinging his face and hands. Something floated through the dark air, long and supple and dripping slime, grimacing at him with its horrible wet mouth. Another illusion or mirage, he thought somewhere in the back

of his mind. They no longer bothered him—in fact, he'd have missed them if they never showed up again—but—Eileen—

The cottage nestled under the tall whispering trees, a peak-roofed stone building in the ancient style that Langdon had thought most appropriate to the enchanted planet. There was little of Terra about it after its century and a half of existence; it was covered with fire-vines over which danced the seeming of little flames; luminous flying creatures nestled against the doorway, and he had never found the cause of the dim sweet singing he could always hear around it.

The door stood ajar, and Eileen was sobbing inside. Langdon came in and found her huddled on a couch before the fireplace, trembling so that it seemed her body must be shaken apart, and crying, crying.

He sat down and put his arms about her and let her cry herself out. Then he remained for a while stroking her hair and saying nothing.

She bit her lip to keep it steady. Her voice was like a small child's, high and toneless and frightened. "It bit," she said.

"It was an illusion," he murmured.

"No. It bit at me. And its eyes were dead. It came out of the floor there, and it was all in rags."

"You had an illusion frighten

you," he said. "A psyche-feeder flying nearby caught your increased nervous output, drew on it, and that of course frightened you still more . . . they're easy to drive away, Eileen. They don't like certain pulse patterns—you just think at them the way I showed you—"

"It was real," she insisted, quietly, with something of a child's puzzlement that anything should have wanted to hurt her. "It was black, but there were grays and browns and red too, and it was ragged."

HE went over to the cupboard and got out a darkly glowing bottle and poured two full glasses. "This'll help," he said, trying hard to smile at her. "*Prosit.*"

"I shouldn't," said Eileen, still shakily but with some return of saneness. "Junior—"

"Junior won't take harm from a glass of wine," said Langdon. He sat down beside her again and they clinked goblets and drank. The fire wavered ruddily before them, filling the room with warm restless light and with dancing shadows from which Eileen looked away.

"I'll get an electronic range installed soon," said Langdon, trying to fill the silence with trivia. "It can't be convenient for you cooking on an ancient-style stove."

"I thought they didn't work on Tanith—electronics, I mean," she answered with the same effort of ordinariness.

"Not at first, with the different laws prevailing here. In the first few decades, we were forced back to the old chemical techniques like fires. That's one reason so few colonists ever came, or stayed long if they did come. But bit by bit, little by little, we're learning the scientific laws and applying them. They've had all the standard household equipment available here for a century. I guess, but by that time I'd already built this place and liked my own things, fires and stoves and all the rest, too well to change. But now that I've got a wife to do my housekeeping, I ought to provide her with conveniences. In fact, I should have done so right away."

"It isn't that, Joe," she said. "I'd have squawked long ago if those little things made any difference. I like handling things myself rather than turning them over to some robot. It's fun to cook and get wood, but Joe, it's no fun when a thing rises out of the steam and screams at you. It's no fun when electric sparks jump over the house and all of a sudden there's only fear, the whole place is choked with fear—" She shuddered closer against him.

"This planet is haunted," she whispered.

"The laws of nature are a little different," he answered as calmly as he could. "But they are still laws. Tanith seems like a chaos,

governed by living spirits and most of them malignant, only because you don't see the regularity. Its pattern is too different from what you're used to. Terra herself must have seemed that way to primitive man, before he discovered order in nature.

"Our scientists here are slowly finding out the answers. Talk to old Chang sometime, he can tell you more about it than I. But I can see the order now, a little of it, and it's a richer and deeper thing than the rest of the universe.

"And you live forever." He gripped her shoulders and looked into her wide eyes. He had to expel the demons of terror from her. A woman five months pregnant couldn't go on this way. He was suddenly shocked by how thin she had grown, and she never stopped shivering under his hands.

"You won't grow old," he said slowly. "We'll be together forever, Eileen. And our children won't die either."

She looked away from him, and sudden bitterness twisted her mouth. "I wonder," she said thinly, "whether immortality is worth having—on this planet."

Suddenly she stiffened, and her lips opened to scream again. Langdon forgot the hurt of her words and looked wildly about the room. But there was only the furniture and the firelight and the weaving shadows. Inside the blood-red win-

dows, the room was sane and real and human.

Eileen shrank against him. "It's over there," she gasped. "Over there in that corner, creeping closer—"

Langdon's face grew bleak, and there was a desolation rising in him. Illusions of one sort or another were part of daily life on Tanith, but they had reality in that they were produced by physical processes and more than one person could perceive them. But hallucinations were another story.

He thought back over two hundred years to the first attempts to colonize. Of an initial three hundred or so, over two-thirds had left within the first three years. And many of them had been insane when the ships took them home.

Men came to Tanith and stayed if they could endure it. But if they couldn't, and tried to stay anyway, they soon fled from the unendurable madness of its reality to a safer and more orderly madness of their own.

From what he had heard, few of them were cured again, even back on Terra.

"I'VE got to see Chang," he said.

The colonists on Tanith tended to live well apart from each other, and unless they owned the new televisors designed especially for the planet their only contact was physical. Once a month or so he would

go to the planet's one town for supplies and a mild spree, and somewhat oftener he would spend a while at another house or have guests himself. But most of the time he had been alone.

And as a man grew older, without loss of physical and mental faculties, he found more and more within himself, an unfolding inward richness which none of the short-lived would ever appreciate or even comprehend. He had less need of other men to prop him up. Or perhaps it was simply that the wisdom, the fullness which came with immortality, made a little of the other colonists' company go a long ways.

There was no denying it, Eileen's twenty-three years of life could not compare with Langdon's two hundred or more. She was like a child, thoughtless, mentally and physically timid, ignorant, essentially shallow.

But I love her. And I can afford to wait. In fifty or a hundred years she'll begin to grow up. In two hundred or so we'll begin to understand each other. As our ages increase, the absolute difference between them will become proportionately insignificant.

An immortal learns patience. I can wait—and meanwhile I love her very dearly.

"What do you have to see him about?" asked Eileen.

"Us," he answered bluntly. "Our situation. It isn't good."

"No," she whispered.

"Can't you learn that there's nothing to fear on Tanith?" he asked. "Death itself, the greatest dread of all, is gone. We've eliminated all actually dangerous life in the neighborhood of our settlements. There are things that can be annoying—the sword-plants, the psyche-feeders, the static discharges—but it's no trick to learn how to avoid them. Nothing here can hurt you, Eileen."

"I know," she said hopelessly. "But I'm still afraid. Day and night, I'm afraid. There are worse things than death, Joe."

"But afraid of *what*?"

"I don't know. Fear itself, maybe. How do I know something won't suddenly be deadly? But I'm not afraid of death. Even with the baby, I wouldn't be afraid of wild beasts or plague or—anything that I could understand." She shook her shining head, slowly. "That's just it, Joe. I don't understand this planet. Nobody does. You don't . . . You admit it yourself."

"Someday I'll know it."

"When? A thousand years from now? A thousand years of horror . . . Joe, some of those things are so hideous I think I'll go mad when they appear."

"A deep-sea fish on Terra is hideous."

"Not this way. These things aren't *right*. They can't exist, but still there they are, and I can't for-

get them, and I never know when they'll appear next or what they'll be this time—" She checked herself, gulping.

"This is a very beautiful world," he said stubbornly. "The colors, the forms, the sounds—"

"None of them are right. Grass may look just as well when it's red or blue or yellow—but it shouldn't be all of them at different times. The sky is wrong, the trees are wrong. Those hideous lakes of life and the things in them, obscene—those voices singing out in the mists, nobody knows what they are—those images of things a hundred million years dead—and the faces, and the whisperings, and there's always something watching and waiting and moving just a little outside the corner of your eye . . . Oh, Joe, Joe, this planet is haunted!"

SHE sobbed in his arms with a rising note of hysteria that she couldn't quite suppress. He looked grimly over her shoulder. A swirling, chiming mist of color formed on one corner of the room, amorphous stirrings within it, a sudden shining birth that laughed and jeered and slipped out through the wall.

He remembered that he had been frightened and repelled when he first came here. But not to this degree, and he soon got over it. Now, even while Eileen wept, he admired the shifting pulse of colors and his heart quickened to the elfin bells.

Terran music sounded wrong to him after two hundred years of the sounds of Tanith.

He thought that all those voices and whisperings and singings, sliding up and down an inhuman scale, and the dreams and the visions, had a pattern, an overall immensity which some day he would grasp. And that would be a moment of revelation, he would see and know the wholeness of Tanith and there would be meaning in it. Not the chaotic jumble of random events which made up the rest of the universe — death - doomed universe tumbling blindly toward a wreck of level entropy and ashen suns—but a glimpse of that ultimate purposefulness which some men called God.

Briefly, a temporal mirage showed beyond the window, a fragmentary glimpse of a tower reaching for the sky. And it was no work of man, nor could it ever be, but it was of a heartbreaking loveliness.

He wondered about the ancient natives. Had they simply become extinct, reached a point of declining evolutionary efficiency such as seemed fated for all species and gone into limbo some millions of years previously? Or had they, perhaps, finally seen the allness of the world and gone—elsewhere? Privately, Langdon rather thought it was the latter. *World without end*—

But Eileen was crying in his arms. He kissed her, and tasted salt on

her lips that trembled under his. Poor kid, poor kid, and with a baby on the way . . .

SOMETHING of the magic of their first days together came back to him. It was a disappointment in love which had sent him to Tanith in the first place, and for all his time here he had lived without that sort of affection. The women of the town served the casual needs of sex, which seemed to become less and less frequently manifest as his own undying personality grew in fullness and self-sufficiency, and that was all.

Still, a single man was incomplete. And a year ago one of the few colony ships landed, and Eileen had been aboard, and a forgotten springtime stirred within him.

Now . . . well . . .

She released herself, smiling with unsteady lips. "I'll be all right now, dear," she said. "Let's go."

I have to talk this matter over privately with Chang. His wife can take care of Eileen. Certainly I can't leave her here alone.

But sooner or later he would have to. It wasn't only that he had to go out and oversee some of the fields on which grew the native plants whose secretions, needed by Terran chemistry, gave them their livelihood. Solitude and long walks through the misty forests and over the whispering hills had become virtual necessities to him. He had

to get away and think, the mighty thoughts of an immortal which no Terran could ever comprehend in his pathetic lifetime were being gestated in his brain. Slowly, piece by piece, the coherent philosophy which is necessary for sanity was coalescing within him, and he was gathering into himself the essence of Tanith. Someday, perhaps a thousand years hence, he would know what it was that haunted him now.

He could not suppress a feeling of annoyance, however. Eileen had had over a year to adjust now, and she was getting worse instead of better. A brief sojourn in utter alienness might be merely pleasing and interesting, but over a longer time one either got used to it or—She'd have to learn, have to accept the sanity of Tanith and know it for a deeper and more real one than the sanity of Terra.

Others had done it, why couldn't she?

CHANG Simon and his wife lived several hundred kilometers away, an hour's flight by airjet. Their spacious house lay amid lawns and trees sloping down to a broad river; it held a serenity and graciousness which Terra had forgotten. Langdon was always glad to be there, and even Eileen seemed to be soothed. She had screamed once on the flight over, when the sky had suddenly seethed with hell-blue

flame, and she was still trembling when they arrived. Their hostess took her off for one of those mysterious private conferences between women which no merely male creature will ever understand, and Langdon and Chang sat out on the veranda and talked.

The Chinese had been in his fifties when he came, one of the first load of colonists, and Tanith could not restore lost youth. But a healthy middle age had its own advantages, it conferred a peace and depth of mind more rapidly than an endlessly young body would permit. In the Solar System, Chang had been a synthesist, taking all knowledge and its correlation as his field of work, and he had come to Tanith in some of Langdon's mood of abandonment — futile to attempt the knowing and understanding of all things, when life had flickered out, in a hundred years. But as an immortal synthesist

The two men sat in the long twilight, saying little at first. It was good just to sit, thought Langdon, to let a glass of wine and a cigar relax tensed muscles while the dusk deepened toward night. At such times he felt more than ever drawn into the secret whole which was Tanith—almost, it seemed, he was on the verge of that revelation, of seeing the manifold aspects of reality gather themselves into one overwhelming entity of which he would be an integral part. The

philosophers and mystics of Terra had sought such identification, and the scientists were still striving to build a unified picture of the cosmic whole. Here, in this environment and with all the ages before him, a man had a chance to reach that ancient goal, intellectual understanding and emotional integration—someday, someday.

The twilight was deep and blue and full of flitting ghostly lights. The feathery trees murmured to each other in a language of their own, and down under the long slope of dew-shining grass the river gleamed with shifting phosphorescence. Something was singing in the night, an eerie wavering scale that woke faint longings and dreads in men and set them straining after something they had once known and forgotten.

OVERHEAD the million thronging stars of Galactic center winked and blazed through the flickering aurora. One of the moons rose, trailing golden light through the sky. A wind blew through drifting clouds, and it seemed as if the wind had language too and spoke to the men, if they could but understand it.

Chang said at last, slowly and heavily: "I don't know how she got past the psychologists on Terra."

"Eileen?" asked Langdon unnecessarily.

"Of course." The older man was

a shadow in the dusk, but the red tip of his cigar waxed and waned as he drew on it for comfort. "Somebody blundered. Or—wait—perhaps it was only that, while she was fundamentally stable, the otherness of Tanith touched some deep-seated psychological flaw in her, something that would never appear under any other environment."

"I don't quite know the system," said Langdon. "What do they do, back at Sol?"

"The first attempts at colonization showed that only the most stable personalities could adapt to—or even survive—the apparent instability of this planet. There aren't many who want to come here at all, of course, but our planetary government maintains a psychological staff in the more important worlds of the Galaxy to check those who do apply. They're supposed to weed out all who couldn't take the strangeness, and so far it's been very successful. Eileen is the first failure I know of."

Something cold seemed to close around Langdon. And then, he realized wryly, he was skirting the main issue—afraid to face it.

"I wonder if we really have the right to keep secret the fact that there is no death here," he said.

"It was a hard decision to make," answered Chang, "but leaving the morals of it aside, it was the only practicable way. Suppose it were generally known that this one place,

in all the known universe, has no age. Imagine all who would want to come here! The planet couldn't hold a fraction of them. Even as it is, we have to space births very carefully lest in a few centuries we crowd ourselves off the world. Furthermore, the unstable social environment produced by such an influx of colonists, most of whom couldn't stand the place anyway, would delay, perhaps ruin, the research by which we hope to find out why life does not grow old here. When we have that answer, and can apply it outside this region of space, all the Galaxy will have immortality. But until then, we must wait." He shrugged, a dim movement in the shining night. "And immortals know how to wait."

"So instead, we simply accept colonists who agree to stay here for life—and then once they get here they're told how long that life will be."

"YES. Actually, the miracle is that the first colonists stayed at all, after most had fled or gone insane. After all, it was ten or twenty years before we even suspected the truth. A world as alien as this was settled only because planets habitable to man and without aborigines are hard to find. Since then, many more such worlds—normal ones—have been discovered, and few people care to risk madness by coming here. Tanith

is an obscure dominion of the Galactic Union, having a certain scientific interest because of its unique natural laws—but not too great even there, when science has so many other things to investigate just now. And we're quite content to remain in the shadow."

"Of course." Langdon looked up to the swarming stars. A sheet of blue auroral flame covered them for a moment.

He asked presently: "How much further have our scientists gotten in explaining the phenomenon?"

"We've come quite a ways, but progress has been mostly in highly technical fields of mathematical physics. You'll have to take a decade or two off soon, Joseph, and learn that subject. Briefly, we do know that this is a region of warped space, similar to those in the neighborhood of massive bodies but of a different character. As you know, natural constants are different in such regions from free space, phenomena such as gravitation and the bending of light appear. This is another sort of geometric distortion, but basically the same. It produces differences in—well, in optics, in thermodynamics, in psi functions, in almost everything. The very laws of probabilities are different here. As a result, the curious phenomena we know appear. Many of them, of course, are simply illusions produced by complex refractions of light and sound waves; others are very real.

The time axis itself is subject to certain transformations which produce the temporal mirages. And so it goes."

"Yes, yes, I know all that. But what causes the warp itself?"

"We're not sure yet, but we think it's an effect of our being near the Galactic center of mass, together with—no, it would take me a week to write out the equations, let alone explain them."

There was a comfort in impersonal discourse, but it was a retreat from more immediate problems. Langdon fairly rapped out the question: "How close are you to understanding why we are immortal?"

"Not at all close in detail," said Chang. "We think that it's due to the difference in thermodynamic properties of matter I mentioned just now, producing a balance of colloidal entropy. Well, elsewhere life is metastable and can only endure so long. Here it is the natural tendency of things, so much so indeed that life is generated spontaneously from the proper chemical mixtures such as occur in many of the lakes and pools hereabouts. In our own bodies, there is none of that tendency toward chemical and colloidal degradation which I think lies at the root of aging and death.

"But that's just my guess, you know, and biological phenomena are so extraordinarily complex that it will probably take us centuries to

work it out. After all, we haven't even settled all the laws of Tanith's physics yet!"

"Several centuries . . . And there is no other planet where this might also happen?"

"**N**ONE have been found, and on the basis of our theory I'm inclined to believe that Tanith is unique in the Galaxy—perhaps in the universe." Langdon was aware of Chang's speculative gaze on him. "And if there were others, they'd be just as foreign to Terra."

"I see—" Langdon looked away, down to the streaming silver gleam of the river. There was a ring of little lights dancing on the lawn; he could hear the tinkle of elfland bells and he thought he could see glowing wings and lithe light forms that were not human — but very lovely.

"You were thinking of moving away?" asked the synthesist at last.

"Yes. I hated the thought, but Eileen—well—you saw her. And you remember those first colonists."

"I do. She is exhibiting all their symptoms. She can't stand the unpredictability of her environment, and she can't adjust her scale of values enough to see the beauty in what to her is wrong and horrible." In the vague golden light, Langdon thought he glimpsed a grim smile on the other man's face. "Perhaps she is right, Joseph. Perhaps it takes someone not quite sane by

the rest of the Galaxy's standards to adjust to Tanith."

"But—can't she see—I've told her—"

"Intellectual understanding of a problem never solves it, though it may help. Eileen takes your word for these being purely natural phenomena. She's not superstitious. It might help if she were! Because explaining the horror doesn't lessen it to her. Man is not a rational animal, Joseph, though he likes to pretend he is."

"Can't she be helped? Psychology?"

"No." The old voice held pity, but it did not waver. "I've studied such cases. If you keep her here much longer, she'll have a miscarriage and go insane. The insanity might be curable, back at Sol, or it might not, but as soon as she returned it would come again. Not that she could ever stand to come back."

"She is inherently unable to adapt herself to an utterly foreign environment. You'll have to send her home, Joseph. Soon."

"But—she's my wife . . ."

Chang said nothing. A shining golden head swooped past in the darkness, laughing at them, and the laughter was visible as red pulses in the night.

There came a step on the veranda. Langdon turned and saw Chang's wife coming out with Eileen. The girl walked more steadily

now. In the dim radiance from the window, her face was calmer than it had been for some time, and for an instant there was a flood of love and joy and relief within Langdon.

Chang was wrong. Eileen would learn. She was already starting to learn. Tonight was the turning point. Tanith would take her to itself and they would be together forever.

"Eileen," he said, very softly, and got up and walked toward her. "Eileen, darling."

The atmosphere trembled between them. She saw the flesh run from his bones, it was a skull that grinned at her, shining evilly green against the dark, and the sounds that rasped from it were the mouthings of nightmare.

Somewhere, far back in the depths of her mind, a little cool voice told her that there was nothing to be afraid of, that it was a brief variation in optical and sonic constants which would pass away and then Joe would be there. But the voice was drowned in her own screaming, she was screaming for her mother to come and get her, it was a nightmare *and she couldn't wake up—*

Langdon ran toward her, with the rags of flesh hanging from his phosphorescent bones, until Chang grabbed him back with a violence he had never known to be possible in the old man.

THERE was a storm outside; the cottage shook to a fury of wind and was filled with its noise and power. They had a fire going, and its restless glow played over the room and beat against the calm white light of fluorotubes, but it could not drive out the luminousness beyond the window.

"Pull the shades," asked Eileen. "Please, Joe."

He looked away from the window where he stood staring out at the storm. Fire sleeted across the landscape, whirling heatless flames that hissed and crackled around the wind-tossed trees, red and blue and yellow and icy white. The wind roared and boomed, with a hollow voice that seemed to shout words in some unknown tongue, and from behind the curtain of flaming rain there was the crimson glow of an open furnace. As if, thought Langdon, as if the gates of Hell stood open just beyond the hills.

"It won't hurt us," he said. "It's only a matter of phosphorescence and static discharges."

"Please, Joe." Her voice was very small in the racket of wind.

He shrugged, and covered the wild scene. He used to like to go out in fire-storms, he remembered, their blinding berserk fury woke something elemental in him and he would go striding through them like a god shouting back at the wind.

Well, it wouldn't be long now. The *Betelgeuse Queen* was due in a

couple of days on the intragalactic orbit that would take her back to Sol. Eileen didn't have long to wait..

He took a moody turn about the room. His wife had been very quiet since her collapse of a week ago. Too quiet. He didn't like it.

She looked wistfully up at his tall form. He thought that she looked pathetically small and alone, curled up—almost crouched—in the big armchair. Like a very beautiful child, too thin and hollow-eyed now but beautiful.

A child.

She has to go. She can't live here. And I—well—if she goes, it will be like a death within me. I love her.

"I remember winter storms on Terra," said Eileen softly. "It would be cold and dark, with a big wind driving snow against the house. We'd come inside, cold but warm underneath with being out in it, and we'd sit in front of a fire and have hot cocoa and cheese sandwiches. If it was around Christmas time, we'd be singing the old songs—"

THE wind yammered, banging on the door. A stealthy shape of light and shadow wavered halfway between existence and nonexistence, over in a corner of the room. Eileen's voice trailed off and her eyes widened and there was a small dry rattle in her throat. She grip-

ped the arms of her chair with an unnatural tension.

Langdon saw it and came over to sit beside her on one arm of the chair. Her hand closed tightly around his and she looked away from the weaving shape in the corner.

"You were always good to me, Joe," she murmured.

"How could I be anything else?" he asked tonelessly. There was a new voice in the storm now, a great bellling organ was crying to him to come out, Tanith was dancing in a sleet of fire just beyond the door.

"I'll miss you," she said. "I'll miss you very much."

"Why should you? I'll be along."

"Will you, Joe? I wonder. I can't ask it of you. I can't ask you to trade a thousand years of life, or ten thousand or a million. for the little sixty or seventy you'll have left out there. I can't ask you to leave your world for mine. You'll never be at home on Terra."

He smiled, without much mirth. "It's a trite phrase," he said, "but you know I'd die for you."

"I don't doubt that, Joe. But would you—live for me?"

He kissed her to avoid answering. *I don't know. I honestly don't know.*

It isn't so much a question of losing immortality, though God knows that means a lot. It means more than any mortal will ever know. It's that I'd be losing —

Tanith.

He thought of Sol, Sirius, Antares, the great suns and planets of the Galaxy, and could not keep from shuddering. Drabness, deadness, colorlessness, meaninglessness! Life was a brief blind spasm of accident and catastrophe, walled in by its own shortness and the barren environment of a death-doomed cosmos. Too small to achieve any purpose, too limited even to imagine a goal, it flickered and went out into an utter dark.

*Tomorrow and tomorrow and
tomorrow*

*Creeps in this petty place from
day to day*

*To the last syllable of record-
ed time,*

*And all our yesterdays have
lighted fools*

The way to dusty death . . .

The storm sang outside, and he heard music and lure and enchantment. It was not a discord, after two centuries he could hear some of the tremendous harmony—after another while, he might begin to understand the song.

If he stayed, if he stayed.

Eileen.

His face twisted. She saw it, and pain bit at her, but there was nothing she could say.

He began pacing, and his mind took up the weary track of the past week. Logic—think it out like a rational being.

EILEEN had to go. But he could stay, and she would understand insofar as any mortal could. Somewhere else, back in the Solar system or on some other of man's many planets, she would find another husband who could give her all his heart. *Which I could never do, because I love Tanith. She would come to think of me as dead, she would hold him dear for the brief span of their lives. She'd be happy. And maybe someday she'd send the child back to me.*

As for himself—well, the initial pain of separation would be hard to take, but he had an immortal's endurance. Sooner or later, the longing would die. And there would be another woman someday on one of the colony ships whom he could love and take to wife forever. He could wait, he had all time before him . . .

And he would be on Tanith . . .

And there would be his friends. He thought of the utter loneliness that waited for him in the Galaxy. Two hundred years was a sizeable draft of eternity; he had acquired enough of the immortal's viewpoint and personality to find the short-lived completely alien. He could never know more than the most superficial comradeship with even the oldest of those who were younger than he. He could never be close to his wife; she would occupy only the smallest part of the emptiness within him. Because before she had grown enough to match him, they

would both be dead.

We'll die, go down in the futility of the universe, and Tanith will go on. I might have been a god, but I'll go down in dust and nothingness. No one will have gotten any good of me. Unless I stay.

The wind called and called.

Eileen was right. I'm not afraid to die. But I am afraid to live, in the way she must. Horribly afraid.

But I love her.

Fifty years hence there'll be another woman.

But I love Eileen now!

Round and round, a crazy roaring whirlpool swinging and crashing toward madness. His thoughts were running in a meaningless circle, the familiar landmarks flickered by with ghastly speed in that devil's race, the room wavered before him.

He snarled with sudden inarticulate rage and grabbed his insulating cloak and rushed out the door.

EILEEN shrank back in her chair. He was gone. She was alone now and all the powers of Tanith were rising up against her. The wind hooted and whistled, piping down the chimney and skirling under the eaves. The blind lifted to an invisible force and she saw the red flames of Hell blazing outside. The fluoroglobes flickered toward extinction, darkness closed down; but it was full of dancing light and flimmering shapes that gibed and

jeered and spun closer to her. The room began to whirl, faster and faster, a tipping tilting saraband on the edge of madness.

All the old forgotten powers of night and dark and Hell were abroad, whirling on the wind and slamming against the door and banging their heels on the roof. They rose out of the floor and seeped from the walls and the air. Fire danced around them, and they neared her, crying something that she knew would drive her mad when she understood it.

Joe, Joe, Joe—Mother—God— Joe was gone out into the storm. Mother was dead these many years, God had forgotten. And the powers closed in laughing at her and mocking and whispering what she could not stand to hear and there and around and around and around and around and around down, down, down, down, down into darkness—

LANGDON did not hear her scream the first time. He stood in the living torrent of light. Fire streamed about him and dripped from his hands; his hair crackled with static electricity and the wind sang to him. It filled him, the song of the wind, the song of Tanith. He was lost in it, whirled up in a great singing joyous laughter. He *knew*—in another moment he would know, he would be part of the allness and have peace within him.

Fire, wind, the slender graceful

trees laughing as the flames leaped around them, a great exultant chant from the living forests and the dancing hills, a glimpse of an ancient Tanithian across many million years, flying in the storm with the red and gold and blue and bronze rushing off his wings, Tanith, Tanith, Tanith.

Tanith, I love you, I am part of you. I can never go. This is the thing other men do not know. More than immortality, more than all the mighty dreams you give us, there is yourself. A day on Tanith is more than a lifetime on Terra, but they will never know that because they have never felt it. The strong love of a man for his home—but this is passion, it is the whole of life, and Tanith gives it back. Here, and here alone, is meaning and beauty and an unending splendid horizon. Here alone a man can belong.

See, see that bird with wings like molten silver!

The second scream was wordless and crazy and horrible, but the dying fragment of his own name went through him like a knife. For the barest instant he stood there while the storm roared about him and the fire rushed over the world. Then, quite simply, he ran back into the house.

The blood and pain and screeching horror of the abortion left him physically ill, but he managed to get her to bed and even, after a

long while, to sleep. Then he walked over to the window and drew the blind. His shoulders sagged with the defeat and death and ruin that was here . . .

THE captain of the *Betelgeuse Queen* did not like Tanith and said as much to his mate as they relaxed on the promenade deck.

"The place gives you the blue willies," he declared. "Everything's *wrong* there. Praise the powers it's so backward and obscure we only have to stop there once a year or so."

"The colonists seem to like it," said the mate.

"They would," snorted the captain. "Worst bunch of clannish provincials I ever saw. Why, they hardly ever leave the planet, except maybe for a year or so at a time on essential business, and they won't be friendly with anybody. Takes a crazy man to stand that world in the first place."

He pointed to a tall man who was half leading, half supporting a young woman along the deck. She would have been beautiful had she

not been badly underweight. She smiled at the man, but her eyes were haunted, and his answering smile was far-away. It went no deeper than his lips.

"That fellow Langdon is the only long-time colonist I ever heard of who left Tanith for good," said the captain. "He must have been there for years. Maybe he was born there, but he's coming back to Sol now. His wife couldn't take the place."

"I think I remember her from a year or so ago," nodded the mate. "Didn't we carry her out with a few other colonists? Pretty as a picture then, and full of life and fun—now look at her. Tanith did that to her."

"Uh-huh," agreed the captain. "I heard a little of the story down by the spaceport. She nearly went crazy — finally had a miscarriage. It was all they could do to save her life and sanity. Only then would that Langdon take her back. He let her go on that way for months." The captain's mouth twisted with contempt. "Holy sun-spots, what a cold-blooded devil!"

Infinite Mathematics

AN old mathematical chestnut and a perennial favorite, popular and fascinating, is the one about the infinite series which goes something like this (it's told in many versions but this is one of the oldest in Western civilization): An ancient

Indian King wished to reward a servant who had rendered him a priceless service. Said he: "You may have anything in the world including half my kingdom." Replied the servitor (who was shrewder than he looked): "I wish for something simple—not your kingdom nor your

wealth. Merely give me a piece of grain one day, two pieces the next, four pieces the next and do that for thirty days. I will be content."

History doesn't record the nobleman's immediate reaction, but it was probably surprise at such a modest request. The later reaction we can almost guess. If the King did as his servant requested,—he stopped in a hurry, for as you keep doubling that grain each day, the quantity mounts up into an astronomical figure before you've gone very far into the month. In fact, before it's gone far at all, it exceeds all the grain ever produced, being produced or that which will be produced!

This tale has many variations, in-

cluding one about money, but the principle is the same. It is a mathematical series of the type called infinite, a geometric ratio wherein each successive term is twice the preceding. A little simple arithmetic of doubling and doubling soon convinces you of the rapid expansion of this expression.

It might be pointed out that in the original version, the service for which the servitor was being rewarded, was theoretically for inventing the game of chess! Undoubtedly when the king saw where his grain pile was heading, he refrained thereafter from playing and probably mounted the head of his servant where he could keep an eye on it!

Fantasy And Literature

A strong preoccupation which began back in primeval times and which grows stronger with the years, holds Man in its grasp. It is the natural, inherent love of fantasy. From the semi-religious attitudes of the cave-man toward natural phenomena, through the Greek, Roman and Scandinavian myths, and the relatively modern literary efforts in the field, fantasy is a rich and powerful part of living.

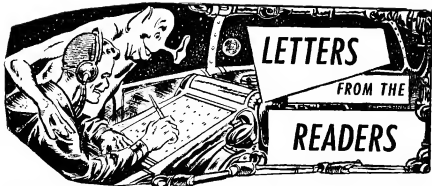
You don't have to go far back to unearth many, many literary works which are vast repositories of fantasy and which have frequently been thoroughly mined and explored by modern writers. Some of the fantastic plots are the oldest in the world.

Dante's famous descent into Hell, in *The Inferno*, Faust's famous bargain with the Devil in which he barter's his soul for youth and love, and the numerous literary precurs-

ors of science-fiction including *Gulliver's Travels*, all have roots in the powerful human urge to glamorize and magnify his own abilities.

From the enormous favor with which modern fantasy is accepted it can be seen that it certainly hasn't lost any of its appeal. People reading fantasy are in the very best company. In one elusive way or another it is pretty hard to find any fantastic idea which hasn't been anticipated in one way or another through the ages in story and in literature.

The earliest known records of Man, the cave drawings in the Spanish mountains of the Pyrenees, contain a fantastic element. The etchings in the cave walls portray obviously impossible bison slaughterings, and in some respects the drawings look like variations on modern art—which is certainly a form of fantasy itself!



HOW DO WE DO IT?

Dear Ed:

The December issue of "Madge" was truly great. Although I hate the type of stories you print I enjoy the magazine. It's hard to see how you do it.

I noticed Mary Jane Stewart, in her letter, asked why the class C fairy tale, *ROCKETSHIP X-M* came out of Hollywood before *DESTINATION MOON*. Chances are that Lippert, Producer of the two-week epic, decided to release *X-M* first and slant advertising to help confuse the public as to what was the real science film and what was the fantastic adventure with the interplanetary setting. He succeeded quite well, and still I see fans who commend *X-M*, the most ridiculous mistake ever to come out of Hollywood. Such an indifferent attitude isn't going to encourage movie producers to come out with really top grade scientifilms like *DESTINATION MOON*.

Well, I've had my say, and am willing to meet all comers who disagree with me.

Fred A. Stitt
2538 Foothill Blvd.
La Crescenta, Cal.

That first paragraph of yours is a dilly, Fred. We'd like to know how we can do it too—make you like stories you hate. Somewhere along the line we feel complimented — we think!

*As to your comments on *ROCKETSHIP X-M*, we'll have to disagree with you. As a matter of fact, we've already gone on record editorially on the subject. As you know, we held the Managing Editorship of *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* and *AMAZING STORIES* for five years, and in the November 1950 issue of *FA* (our own personal pride and joy!) we discussed the film. You can refer to that editorial for our complete viewpoint on the matter. All we will say at this point is that any film that can receive the box office acclaim that *ROCKETSHIP X-M* did, deserves an accolade—because it proves that the American public liked the sample of stf that film represented. Whether or not it was as good as *DESTINATION MOON* is beside the point. The point being that the American public does not know stf as we old-timers in the field do. Therefore a film like *ROCKETSHIP X-M*, while failing in some places to satisfy us, would, because of its complete novelty, in-*

trigue the millions of people we want to interest in our favorite field of literature. What's wrong with that, Fred? . . . wth.

HITTING A PAR

Dear Editor:

My preferences on the stories in the second issue of "Madge" are summed up as follows:

MEET ME IN TOMORROW

Excellent! When an author springs a surprise and works it into a dramatic climax, he'll get applause out of me!

TECHNICAL SLIP

Not quite standard. Although not exactly poor, the story failed to click—at least with me. The best I can do is rate it Fair.

"WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL . . ."

Excellent! On the strength of its sly, humorous vein, which touched so deftly the farcical nature of life in modern times, especially with relation to the futility of checkmating what appears to be the ravages of old age creeping into the constitution of political administration. It seems that Ephraim had the best solution of escapism — a bottle of rum, a secluded cave, and "ya fadder's mustache!"

THE ULTIMATE QUEST

Good. After I finished reading this droll piece of satire I sat in the easy chair and assumed the role of The Thinker. Here I am (thought I) in the world of the present, with what prevails of stupidity, asininity, and superficiality. How much better will the world of the future be, even with accumulated wisdom and learning. We might be wise, maybe too wise, but, where ignorance is bliss, a little learning can be dangerous.

TOURISTS TO TERRA

Good. Ignorance and superstition takes its toll on Earth, and that which humanity dares not comprehend, could eventually be its salvation.

IT'S RAINING FROGS

Life seems to be the same everywhere. Even a different dimensional existence doesn't make any concessions in that eternal squabble between male and female, husband and wife. The story was Good, nevertheless.

THE BRAVE WALK ALONE

Plot was a bit worn and faded, where the hero redeems himself from the stain of cowardice by making the supreme sacrifice at the crucial moment. But I liked it. Rated it Good.

THE OLD ONES

Coming from a new writer this was a Good story, lending a different treatment to the age-old problem of what to do with the old folks. Betsy Curtis solved it dramatically and admirably. The story reminded me of a chap I knew who—when he was in his forties—emphatically stated that he wished to be exterminated after he had hit the age of fifty. And he was of the opinion that everyone else who reached the same age ought to meet a similar fate. What do you think happened when he reached fifty? He up and married an eighteen-year-old girl!

Joseph Kankowski

9 Glennon Place

West Orange, N.J.

Which only goes to prove, Joe, that it's never later than you think! . . . wth.

HE LIKES TIME TRAVEL

Dear Ed:

I never thought such exquisite de-

light could occur, that I would read a magazine in which fifty per cent of the stories dealt with time travel. But it happened. Four out of the eight stories in the December issue of "Madge" have to do, directly or indirectly, with that stimulator of thought, that pearl of paradox—time travel. Many thanks, ed!

TECHNICAL SLIP was the best tale, although there is a pretty fine distinction. Its moody atmosphere, the futility, the nostalgia, all combined to make it a memorable story.

"WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL . . ." was rather humorous and still had a plot I found fascinating. I would have liked the story even better if author Keene had thrown in a bit more pseudo science to help explain the hero's switch in time. But it was still an enjoyable yarn.

IT'S RAINING FROGS! was imaginative. Did anyone ever stop to think that it's possible that there are only three dimensions?—unless you theoretically call Time a dimension. Personally I am satisfied to live in the present three—but I like to read about four, even though the thought can prove to be disturbing at times!

TOURISTS TO TERRA was a good, clean-cut short with a neat ending.

MEET ME IN TOMORROW was pretty fair. Somehow it seemed like Archette started to write a good old blood - an - thunder novelette, suddenly thought of a surprise ending, and chopped it short.

THE OLD ONES built up to a trip to Venus and then had a climax slapped on before the ship ever reached its goal. This novelette didn't hold my interest . . . I found myself skipping paragraphs and going back to read them for clarity . . . Maybe I'm just prejudiced

against women in the field of literature.

THE BRAVE WALK ALONE had a cut and dried plot that definitely was not science fiction. In other words, it was corn.

Now we come to the story that was rated so highly in the editorial, THE ULTIMATE QUEST. A satire is a parallel of existing deplorable conditions set, usually, in alien surroundings. "QUEST" was not a satire on anything that needs changing. True, it poked fun at marriage and having children, but I have been led to believe that marriage and children should be treated with approval. Of course, I may have missed the point of the story . . .

The cover was an eye-catcher. Just as long as you don't have a set policy for covers, I'll be happy. If you punctuate your covers with BEMs and symbolic covers and covers of Imagination, you will be establishing a good policy. Assume the same well-rounded policy for your stories. That way "Madge" will never go wrong.

Earl Newlin, Jr.
103 Peck Avenue
San Antonio, Texas

Frankly, Earl, we got an entirely different opinion of "QUEST." And we can't even agree with your definition of a satire. Satire is the employment of sarcasm—in a humorous vein. And if we accept your idea, then all humor would be out-lawed. Afterall, insofar as marriage and children are concerned in our own society, you hear jokes on the radio concerning them—not to mention every phase of our existence! The whole thing boils down to one point: do you like a bit of humor? We do and we thought "QUEST" was very funny . . . wth.

MORE BOK COVERS

Dear Ed:

I came home last night and found the latest issue of IMAGINATION waiting for me. I examined it eagerly—especially the cover. What happened? I found that the December cover looks just like all the other stf mags. Too much beautiful Dame and not enough science or fantasy. After the first issue, which was beautifully done, this was quite a letdown.

Let's have more Bok, shall we?

The stories, however, were up to snuff, although I don't think you'll match your first issue for awhile. In the current issue I liked THE ULTIMATE QUEST and TOURISTS TO TERRA the best. The others were all good, but the above two stood out.

Yours for a more vivid "Madge."

Emily Doniger

2065 69th St.

Brooklyn 4, N.Y.

How do you like the cover on this issue, Emily? And as to future covers, we've got a new Bok masterpiece scheduled right now. And there will be other equally vivid covers. So just wait . . . wkh.

A "MADGE" FAN FOR LIFE!

Dear Ed:

Three cheers and a hearty Hooray for IMAGINATION! It has everything a fan could hope for—a good cover, good stories, dignified appearance, everything. Wow! What a magazine.

In the five years I've been reading stf I have never seen a cover half as good as the Bok painting on the first issue. All I can say is, keep it up!

As for the stories, I always thought that the editors stuck a

really bad yarn in just to get fan mail. But now I see that they have been using the wrong technique. It's been a hard job classifying the yarns in the first issue of "Madge," but I finally put them in this order: 1st place is a tie between LOOK TO THE STARS by Willard Hawkins, and WIND IN HER HAIR by Kris Neville.

2nd place goes to THE SOUL STEALERS by Chet Geier. 3rd, INHERITANCE by Edward Ludwig—very good. 4th, ONE FOR THE ROBOT—TWO FOR THE SAME by Rog Phillips. This fourth place story would have rated better than the best in most other magazines.

S. Wilson Holman

326 Cleveland Ave.

Trenton, N.J.

We'll try and make future issues even better. And we've got the covers and stories to do just that! . . . wkh.

THE HIGHEST PRAISE

Dear Ed:

IMAGINATION is wonderful. You are to be congratulated for dreaming up such a magazine. You deserve, in fact, the highest praise we readers can offer. But:

Can you deliberately leave the path as it is on the market?

Can you keep the promises you have made in the first issue?

Can you deliberately leave the path of the past and be a pioneer in the dreams you have for the future?

I hope so, for we need a magazine like IMAGINATION.

Reginald S. V. Wood

2109 E. Virginia

Denver, Colo.

We'll let the magazine speak for itself in answer to your questions. All we'll say is, yes! . . . wkh.



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Scribe **W.V.T.**

THE ROSICRUCIANS, AMORC
San Jose, California

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The ROSICRUCIANS
(AMORC)

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